HOG

a love story
by jp meldrum

"'Cause you're just a man; It's just what you do
Your head in your hands as you color me blue"
- *"Norman fucking Rockwell", Lana Del Rey*

1

"Never let an Iranian in here. They walk in, you say 'go!'. They are…" the drunk Iranian man opened his palm and made his right-hand dangle before reaching across to

his left breast and slapping his proximal phalanx and thumb against himself – a gesture suggesting mental ineptitude – before saying the R-word. “Except, I tell you, the Lurs and the Kurdish people. They drink, like you and I. You go to right place, I take you there, it is like a province, as you say it in Canada, of paradise, and the women…” he blew a chef's kiss before looking around the empty store and poorly whispering. “Good pussy! You know, my friend, you are a good one, what is your name?”

“Jake”. Not his first time asking my name.

“Jake, like Jacob yes, you become Israel; Ya'qub…” I am not Jewish, it's just Jake, not Jacob. “You, my friend, are the patriarch, a noble prophet, of my mosque…” his mosque was the liquor store I supervised for six months in my mid-twenties. “You bless me with beer, nectar of Allah” he chef-kissed again. “I used to drink much stronger, hard stuff, but this one…” he held up his can. On his most sluggish rougher days, he would indulge in the hard stuff, namely Smirnoff.

“Faxe premium?” I questioned his taste with an air of authority. Faxe is an infamously cheap Danish beer associated with unruly laborers, the unhoused population, and the most foolish of self-loathing hipsters; in actuality, not a sensible economic choice. There is a legion of cheaper singles with comparable alcohol-by-volume: Haus Lagar, for example. Despite his blowhard gab and slurred ways, I could never resent this man, no matter how problematic he could be. I’ve fought with the bottle for days on end too – five-day benders culminating in Adderall and IPAs chewing the bartenders' ears off about pop culture before getting kicked out simply because I was annoying. I have the privilege to wake up in middle class comfort and without the post-traumatic stress of war and poverty, my demons are self-made, but I know a monkey on your back better than Jane Goodall.

“Faxe! Yes. Good price, and it brings me to a happy place. Like heaven. I first think, I am a deep thinker, like a philosopher, and then I sleep. When I used to drink brown liquor… no, no, no… I was very bad. You know, I have prostate problem, no control…” his pants were regularly covered in what I used to presume was the dregs of a tall-can… alas ‘tis piss. “But, you Saint Jacob, my friend, the world, the world is a fucked up place…” he could emphatically cuss with the best of them. “Have you read Karl Marx? Marx and…” he looked heavenward to ask Him for the second name. Unfortunately, I was his God today; a deity with a tendency to treat conversation like a game of Jeopardy.

“Engels”

“Yes, my friend! My comrade! Capitalism…" His drunken accent separated each syllable of cap-it-a-lism that sounded like a swingin’ drum fill. He droned on about Marx, Engels, and Omar Khayyam whom I was not privy to. I wrote down ‘Amir Khan’ upon his insistence without him correcting it. I engaged occasionally with pieces of historical trivia as he rambled about his ability to piss publicly in Quebec, the pedophilia of the royals, the horrors of war, and the vaginal quality of various races. “You, my friend, I must say, of all the women of the world, Persian women are the most beautiful. You deserve Persian pussy, the other guy who works here, not him, he does not understand the fruit of life. You deserve Persian pussy. I take you to Iran, we go to…” Not for the life of me can I remember where in Iran he could get us an abundance of booze and gash. As he was hitting the increasingly funny, alliterative Persian Pussy refrain for the umpteenth time, a splendidly alternative woman walked in. Persian-pussy-pee-pants wished the glabrous-headed customer “aurevoir”, as he allegedly spoke five languages, and thanked me again for the gab, leaving with his sack of Faxe. I always got a rush from talking to him, similar to the high of a good spar. He was sweet, in a way, but the trauma of the Iran–Iraq War self-therapized with substance abuse had soured his soul beyond repair. Impulsive vulgarity and raw sexuality were, according to the 200-page policy manual, unwelcome in this boutique liquor store.

“Sorry about him” I said as a reflex – he was banned from the store unless I was working alone.

“No, it's fine! I thought you did quite well. Some people just need someone to talk to”

“He makes me a little uneasy, but I can’t deny the charm of his ‘Persian pussy’” I was going out on a limb by reiterating his crass language. I resented my job’s rigidly codified rulebook, but given the nu-politics of language and the prototypically atypical countenance of her, ‘pussy’ was a dodgy first utterance. Fortunately, it induced a chuckle and a retort.

“Does he come in a lot?”

“Like clockwork”

“Are you here alone?”

“Mostly”

“Well, hopefully, he makes it a little less lonely. I’d hate to be cooped up here by myself”

“It does feel a little island-ish here, from time to time…” a loss of eye contact followed by a pregnant pause segwayed into more formal customer-customee rhetoric according to company standards. “Anyway. Looking for anything in particular?”

She politely declined, intimating an age-old familiarity with my liquor store; this was clearly routine. I had never seen her before. I serve at least two hundred customers a day, often in a hungover automated blur. “Can I offer you a bag?” I’d say. “How’s your day?” “Good, and yours??-” “Pretty good, and you?”; I’d ask twice without noticing. But her amiable way riveted my jaded nervous system. I rang up today’s haul: a bottle of Oyster Bay Sauvignon Blanc and two cans of pre-mixed gin drinks. I avoided the humiliation of offering her a bag by doing so voluntarily. “See you next time!” she sang with animated sincerity and grinned her way out of the store. Her smile was so genial that I failed to notice her gripping an empty tote bag for the very purpose of not taking one of our disposable sacks. We avoided the embarrassing banality of customer service autopilot. Our brief encounter, it appeared, meant something to the both of us.

As my shift slowed to a halt, I thought not of the Iranian, but of her benevolent smile – overeager for good ‘morrow whenever our morrow came.

I learned the term Meet Cute not long ago – a loose trope in romantic comedies wherein future lovers become acquainted in a memorable, often quirky, way. *Bringing Up Baby* comes to mind as a quintessential and absurd Meet Cute surrounding a leopard on the loose. I can’t say for certain if my aforementioned moment qualifies as a Meet Cute but pre-romance interactions with distanced reflection allows one to frame nearly any early encounter as rom-comesque. Rose colored hindsight. For better or for worse, when I think of Ms. Adamson, I smell Faxe-laced-urine and Persian pussy.

The following Friday, she returned. The shop was conveniently located a hop, skip and a jump from the beach, and this day was a scorcher. She carried a wicker picnic basket overrun with technicolor fruit and a Mexican blanket draped over her weather-appropriately bare shoulder. “You again,” she said tongue-in-cheek, like a laconic bounty hunter in a spaghetti western.

“At your service,” I said, like a bellhop.

“The gals insist I make some Sangria. Not my typical drink of choice. What do I need? Other than the fruit” she asked, breaking character. I was flattered to have the opportunity to chit-chat with her, but disappointed to do so under the guise of customer service. I had clocked her at ten-to-fifteen years older than me; a youthful early forties at most. She carried herself like a well-educated professional. I was 26, working retail, and pecking away at a degree in English literature. My remaining friends from

secondary school were now working abroad with Masters and PhDs. I had to redo my twelfth grade at a community college while dishwashing before attending school part-time. I had a chip on my shoulder – I was lagging - I was an alcoholic. Mixology is a stupid five-dollar word for drinkin' good, and that is to say, I was competent in the art form.

"How bougie are we talking?"

"White girl bougie". White girl as an adjective that always brings to mind the 2009 Gucci Mane song "Wasted" featuring Plies of Bronx rap trio the LOX. Gucci uses the similarly prefaced 'white-boy wasted'."Wesley Presley" by Future too – he uses "white girl" repeatedly referring to both Caucasian women and cocaine. Rick Ross as well, on the Gucci tune "Head Shots"

"Triple sec, for sure," I said, consulting the wine shelf in my periphery while guiding us towards the liqueur section. "Maybe a Rioja?" as we pivoted to Spain. With Future unconsciously taking hold, I stepped into forward-momentum-pushing territory.

"What are you and the girls getting up to?" she motioned to her outfit and Mexican blanket. Her willowy physique made the skimpy beach attire seem less provocative and more fashionable in spite of her exposed skin. Her tattoos were visibly numerous, vague and black, and gray and tasteful. I noticed a serpentine dragon slithering up her arm, over her shoulder, and towards her breast. The girl with the dragon tattoo.

"Beach day, of course. You should see it down there. It's a party!". Future had worn off; all I could do was finagle some generic comments about the beach crowd's beverage choice, and insincerely pining to be on the beach too, but not with suave enough discourse to fish for an invite. I rang her up with quiet defeat and she left. I got off shortly before sunset and decided to detour my walk home towards the beach. I had purchased an eight-pack of Guinness – I was on a seasonally inappropriate dark beer kick stemming from an epic display of pubbery on Saint Patrick's Day – and a Caesar tall-can. The strand was no longer at capacity but had a dozen groups of sun kissed party-people remaining; I heard "Pump Up the Jams" playing ambient against the crashing waves. My night vision is weak, at best, and I failed to spot my new favorite customer and her friends. I put my headphones on, listened to some Fela Kuti, and drank my Caesar before journeying homeward. I made a frozen pizza and watched *The Bridges of Madison County* and *The Great Gatsby* before bed.

My iPhone had phantom touches – a known issue with the X model. iPhone is the new Kleenex - synonymous with the smartphone; or a materialistic display of one's wealth over the serfdom of Android users. Thanks to iPhone supremacy, I was able to get it repaired on Apple's dime at a kiosk in the mall. It was to take roughly four hours, so I bought *Klara in the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro from the bookstore and read about a quarter-way-through over some sushi from across the street. Mall sushi is horrifying – it was worth the trek. I read *Remains of the Day* a few years prior after picking it up from my community college library at random. The Japanese-sounding last name written on its spine appealed to my weeaboo sensibilities. The very reason I was in school was to cure my disillusionment from working dead-end jobs – the exact theme of Ishiguro's masterpiece.

Remains of the Day reinforced the importance of free-time I learned from working myriad entry-level jobs. Amongst the economics of work-time-ambition, I always tried my best to stay vigilantly creative, or, at least, well-read. When reading on the job, I never hide my book so as to make a conversation piece of it to break up the dredge of customer service small talk. Am I guilty of vain, accessorized reading? Sure, but believe it or not, a lot of alcoholics are vivacious readers.

Of course, I brought *Klara and the Sun* to work the day after my phone was repaired.

3

I was only a few pages further into *Klara* when she reappeared. This time, she didn't seem to notice the lonely cashier. She quickly b-lined it to the New Zealand shelf. It was, again, quite a hot day. She was wearing the same beach attire, including the wicker basket and Mexican blanket minus the fruit. Before I could muster a casual "no sangria today?" She was at the till with her regular libations and asked me about *Klara*.

"Are you enjoying the book?" she said like a smug teacher pressing a literaphobic student.

"I am, yeah, have you read it?"

"No, not yet but I've liked some of his other books"

"Me too, *Remains of the Day* is one of my favorites."

"Yeah, I read it years ago now. I remember thinking it was pretty wonderful. The movie was good too… So… what do you like about it?" she said, now playfully prescient in tone.

And in a rare moment of earnest praise, I spontaneously said “the kindness. I usually flock to the more cynical, we’re in cynical times, I think, but this stuff is so good-natured and thoughtful and welcoming and rare…”. She began to blush. I slowed my spiel as I noticed her positive reception to my review. I managed to avoid disparaging the uninspired casting of Anthony Hopkins in *The Remains of the Day* film.

“Wow… that’s… a lovely thing to say. I don’t know what to say… I’ll have to give it a read”. She paid up and left the store tinted crimson.

On Spike TV in the early aughts, there was a show called *Keys to the VIPs* that taught young men how to coerce women into sex. It's gross yet rather funny like how *The Man Show* is to watch now. I guarantee they would never let me audition for any Spike TV production. Seductioneer, Casanova, flirtatious, coquettish, gift of gab, smooth operator, Romeo, charmer, suave, would not be names I’d give myself. Careful moments of authenticity, it seems, carry the charge of a thousand Warren Beatty’s if shared with the right person — probably no grand “Your so Vain” burn song though. In my neurotic self-administered-verbose-psychoanalytic way, I’ve later attempted to repeat the visceral magnificence of this momentary earnestness to little success. My love of alcohol in high doses may stem from a desire to achieve spontaneous Genuity. Only in the unconscious and automatic does the veracity of self come to light. I hoped it wouldn’t fleet. An affable stranger like Ms. Andea Adamson walked in unprejudiced and open to benevolence. I, the lowly liquor clerk, found benevolence in Ishiguro's prose, raised myself, vertically, to his virtue, and laid them plainly, truthfully, upon her. In her freshly flushed cheeks, I felt hope. I hope it doesn't fleet. A crimson light across the way. A peach part with our initials carved, shaky, with a trembling blade into the aging trunk of a gifted Sakura. A teenager misinvoicing Radiohead and Juliet. Ghastly love songs with sickening jangly guitar stylings and longing lyrics about bodies and ‘how special you are’ and pain and loss. I hope it doesn't fleet. I’ll be a fool for you; Turn his sleep to wake. An unpromised beginning. This promised end. Every flower, every garden, every gynecological allegory. Gertrude Stein wins the Rose Bowl: a great catch is a chance for more. Options, oodles of options. I hope it doesn't fleet. Storyboards are puzzle pieces bestrewed but the pictures begun… will get it done? Mountains and molehills blur. It can happen once. It can happen twice. Meet Cuter. Friends to Lovers. Meet Kinder? A trilogy? Always a trilogy. I hope it doesn't fleet. She spoke ambrosial fragrance – a sense of new joy ineffably diffused. An exit won from the void and formless infinite. I hope it doesn't fleet. It's the SpongeBob episode where he gets lost in Rock Bottom and the bus leaves the moment he reaches the stop endlessly but the opposite; always on the bus to Crystal Top – a dream. Resenensitive. Reromantic. Reascension. Klara on the porch. Andrea and the sun. I hope it doesn't

fleet. But not yet, I must disclaim, I didn't even know her name, but, yes, in fact, I did, I say, do what I could with the remains of the day.

4

I sold a bunch of video games I bought during the peak-lockdown times to a decent profit. The retro game market, I discovered, can be quite lucrative with a little patience. I took a few weeks off and used my savings and cashed-out games to visit my friend Lance in Toronto at the dawn of my summer break. I drank Guinness for breakfast and vodka for lunch. We produced a lot of white rap. I brought *Klara* with me and didn't read a page. Instead, I watched romantic comedies on Netflix before bed. My infatuation with Ms. Adamson was on the back burner. I came home, and, alas, it was nowhere to be found. The novel still sits somewhere in Lance's apartment.

I bussed straight to work from the plane ride after getting my brother Alexander to drop my uniform off at the shop a few days earlier so I could hit the ground running. I was jet-lagged, slap-happy, and about as open-heartedly extroverted as one could be in a dead-end customer service role. As my shift was coming to an end, I was all by my lonesome with purple bags under my eyes you could sell as reusable. I had drunk a couple bathroom-tall-cans away from the closed-circuit cameras before Andrea showed up. She had a frazzled look, but upon clocking that it was me, her demeanor calmed.

"Sorry! I know your closing," she said with faux urgency

"No, no, no problem at all," I said, buzzed and truthful; it was no problem at all… she's stunning.

Company policy only allowed for Stingray Music, which is the piss-poor Canadian equivalent to Sirius XM. I usually played the throwback stations, which after 5PM switched programming to deep-cuts and longer prog-rock songs. My favorite repeat evening song was "Touch Me in the Morning " by Diana Ross. It is structured with non-stop rising action featuring massive cinematic strings on its bombastic chorus that remind me of anime transformation sequences. She slowed her pace and commented on the radio. "I love this song!"

"I'd love to say it was my choice, but company policy forces me to play the radio. But, yeah, I couldn't agree more"

She recollected, in brief, how much her mom loved "Endless Love", a cinematic duet between Lionel Richie and Diana Ross. It's ridiculous how romantic that tune is. I

didn't press, but it sounded like her mother was no longer with us. She said her mom would dance with her while belting the Ross parts in jest while begging her to "do the Lionel part". Andrea marvelously reimpressionized her mother's singing with a creaky keyless falsetto: "they tell me how much you care!" which made me giggle. She swiveled the conversation towards our literary McGuffin.

"I haven't seen you in here in a while"

"I was in Toronto visiting some friends"

"Girlfriends?" I was flabbergasted by how tropey, forward, and out of character this seemed, but who was I to project a personality onto someone I was just getting to know.

"No, no girlfriends" I admit, I thought about some girls I met (albeit, simply befriended) in Toronto, but travel shrouds everything in romance and fantasy. Homebase is pragmatic and tangible. "No, no girlfriends", I repeated. I hoped my smile would be receptive instead of being dismissive.

"Boyfriends?" she said with only a hint of progressiveness, leaning into the diet homophobia territory of the wrestling scene in the first Tobey McGuire *Spider-Man*: 'that's a cute outfit, did your boyfriend give it to you?'

"With a space between boy and friend." I was talking with my hands, acting out the syntax of boy (space) friend.

"Well…" she held with a girly fermata. "I finished that book, I tore through it on my deck in an afternoon..." She has a deck, I thought. I'd love to have a deck of my own. She was thinking about me, I justly imagined, on her deck. 'My deck'; possessive. I don't smoke anymore, but if I had a deck, I'd have to start again. She's got a deck of her own. Why did she mention her deck? So cool. "You were right, it's so sweet"

"Thanks" I was coy in a self-conscious, two-drinks-at-work way.

"Did you finish it?"

If I had given the novel a glance on Wikipedia, I would have bullshitted my way through the conversation, carefully remarking on plot beats and character moments, but my sincerity is why we became acquainted, so I could only tell her the truth. "I didn't finish it, no. I left it behind at my buddy's place".

"Oh, man! I was looking forward to picking your brain about it. Well…" she said with the same fermata, this time contemplative. "I could lend you my copy?"

I am usually opposed to casual lending unless it's utilities – an egg, a mop, a phone charger. I resent being held to return something at a loose date and have a tendency to forget the origin of a book or game or DVD or what have you. I did my best to politely decline. “That’s okay, I can get it from the library”

She furrowed her brow in contempt. “The library? Really?”

“I mean, I have a library card” I wondered if she was old enough to get a reference to the “Library Card” song from *Arthur*. The cartoon aardvark, not the 1981 Best Picture winner of the same name.

“I’m sure you do” she glared at me, my glasses more so, with malice. Her eyes were searched to see if I was a dubious poser. I could tell she had dealt with variations of dubious posers before me. I showed her my tablet hiding behind the till as an offering of good faith and honest virtue.

“I’ve been reading old X-Men comics on this thing” Meet in the middle, I thought. Reading comics is unattractive to a shrewd Ishiguro fan and worth hiding, but it's still reading. An offering of sincere compromise. She ignored my deflection.

“God!” she exclaimed with disgruntled familiarity. ‘Another Marvel man-child’ was what I heard. It dawned on me that she went out of her way to connect. She read 90597 words at my behest. A solitary deed of radical tenderness, especially given the amiable prose of *Klara*. I wanted to channel the sentimentality of all those romcoms, all the poetry, all the Diana Ross love songs, and return the favor by any means necessary. But she was a see-saw and a walking contradiction – as defined by my current construction of her up to this point. She read 300 pages of gentle literature for a shaggy blowhard, yet satirized and ironized the saccharine modality of 80’s R&B. A woman like Andrea does not allow for my roguish projections to hold water. Butterflies flew about the swelling pit in my gut. Red shame washed over me. I felt I had fumbled the touchdown pass, but, to my relief, she put on a grin. “You idiot! I’m making excuses to see you again. Was I not clear when I said ‘girlfriends? I will only stoop so low”. I was now the one tinted crimson, like Nightcrawler’s jacket, and excitedly flustered, like Jean Grey’s mysterious power-up leading into the Phoenix Saga.

“I’d love to borrow it” I am just a little schoolboy rehearsing his apology.

“Great, when do you work next?”

“Tomorrow, same time, til’ close”

“I’ll see you tomorrow; and I don’t wanna hear a peep about the X-Men.” Good call, I thought, I’d built up a hardy twenty-minute lecture on Chris Claremont’s epic two decade run that I was eager to talk at anyone vulnerable enough to listen.

I bagged up her wine and handed it over. She was primed to leave before I pressed for her name.

“Andrea, pronounced Ahn-Drey-Ah” she said, mocking my earlier gesticulating with exaggerated hand motions.

“I’m Jake”

“I know,” she pointed at my name tag. I looked down like a dope, and she swung her finger up towards my face. “Gotcha!”.

I closed up shop; too eager to get back to the mosque and reacquaint with Andrea. I walked home, drank four Guinness and watched *Alita: Battle Angel*.

5

With Andrea slotted to visit Liquor Deluxe sometime during my 8-hour shift, each moment preceding was stomach-churning agony. The simple joy of bailing on plans is something I am not above; however, this is not an option when on the clock. I’m cornered. Excitement and nervousness, my dad always told me, are the same feeling depending on perception; it was in flux – excited to revisit the maniac jocular candor she had revealed yesterday yet nervous to find out more about her. How old was she? What kind of life had she led? Why is she flirting with the liquor store guy? What does she do for work? Is she divorced? What does her deck look like? Does she drink alone? Is this a polycule situation? Would I be okay with that? Why does she keep a number 2 shaved haircut? Will I get to see the whole snake tattoo?

To distract myself, I spoke at length with a self-employed landscaper, a Faxe drinker, during the quiet part of the afternoon. We rolled our eyes at myopic municipal bylaws, talked frankly about his ex-wife and dying cat, and pondered his retirement plans. A woeful, forlorn man, but with a bleeding heart; he’d benefit from practicing accountability regarding his ex. My Iranian friend came by as well – a vodka day. He told me there weren’t enough blonde women in Iran, proposing, what was essentially, human-trafficking, as his million-dollar enterprise. No pee-pants this time, but he was so smashed I had to cut him off for the day. He got upset with me, but I promised if he came back tomorrow, he could buy all the beer he could afford. That seemed to ease his

mind. In so many words, he asked me if another liquor store might serve him. I sent him towards the government store about a mile away. An employee there once asked if I shop at Big and Tall; they can deal with him.

I sat on my iPhone mindlessly browsing fringe Instagram meme accounts. I was looking at an image of Sonic with pregnant Tails before I looked up and saw her with the book in hand. She skipped the wine and came straight to the till. With judicious force, she slapped it down in front of me and sauntered out in a swaggering quietude. I restarted the novel when I got home instead of watching Kore-Eda's tangentially related *Air Doll* as I had planned. I sensed I had a deadline.

6

Scrawled on page 132 was a phone number. Clever, she was, to put it in text so tiny I couldn't flip through the book rapidly to scan for graffiti. I reached for my phone and carefully plotted a text. I thought a curt "I finished the book" would do. I sat in waiting, pining, if you will, and turned on *Runaway Jury* with Dustin Hoffman and John Cusack. Not until the typical Grisham twist began to unfold dids he text me back.

"You have passed my test" followed by a GIF of Jake the Dog from Adventure Time rubbing his hands together, subtitled "all according to plan / *sinister chuckle*". My irony radar malfunctioned. I went to bed without replying.

7

When you awake, for fleeting moments, you are in the purest of states. This is the best time to send procrastinated text messages and confront difficult social tasks. In my estimation, the weight of the day doesn't hit you for about 45 seconds. Capture it or let it slip? I reached for my phone and cut to the chase in simplest terms: "so when do you wanna hang out?" But she didn't respond, not for the duration of the early day. I served, and the waiting game began, but she lobbed it back, high into the sky, and the sun obscured the little green tennis ball. Waves of overthought, anxiety, and doubt destroyed my day away from the mosque. Momentary relief provided only in menial busy work and mindless entertainment. Feverous self-loathing enveloped me, imagining others with superior constitutions for this love-fifteen game. Andrea would be disgusted knowing how worked up I was. The 'ick'. I should not think like this. I should be calm. My brother would be calm. This is not normal, this fretted frame of mind. I over analyze; a word worth a thousand words. Jake the Dog… My name is Jake. Am I a dog? A dawg? The dog? In 2015, I performed a cover of Beyonce's miscarriage anthem "Heaven" at

an open-mic following a very nervous non-binary person struggling through a song from *Adventure Time*. No: It means nothing. *King Lear*. "Nothing" Cordelia says, and shatters the king. But I am without children unlike him, without a spouse just like him. "Nothing" is everything. "Nothing"; Hamlet's euphemism for vagina during The Murder of Gonzago or The Mousetrap. Dating apps off-and-off over the past year. Met up with a handful of people. Cyber communications – my perception of such is that it is nothing – a dim-lit bar and yappy ol' me – tragically something. Gone passably well. No Tik Tok readymade horrible first date story – the fairer sex expects so little from our male courtship; I don't blame them. These dates – something, I insist – amounted to friendship and acquaintance; no kisses no cuddles… two hugs, I remember, total, from my handful of suitees. Some spoke of intimacy workshops, sex diplomas, infographics: "men have rights… the rights to shut the fuck up"; a handmade sign. Cold and clinical. How does one become qualified for such statements? Intimacy workshops? Love and sex is all inclusive; we were all born from a fuck; from a bonk. Over-intellectualizing the emotional is beyond innocuous. Academic prose usurping the poetics of affection. I vehemently abide by the virtue of thorough consent but am I a prude for finding disquietude in transforming enigmatic carnality into theoretical discipline? Lust is not baking. Love is not science. It is a home-cooked meal and work of abstract expressionistic art. Wanton love and longing and lust is but prompt eloquence flown from the lips in numerous verse, more tunable than needed lute or harp to add more sweetness. Book V, *Paradise Lost*, revised for clarity. I see no Milton in objectifying passion. No Shakespeare in the feedback loop of Tinder. Is there an apt way to allegorically spin 1.1 of *Lear* into a symbol for sanitizing the mystique of my butterflies? Only the Fool could. Do she/they think about me still? I think about them all the time. Forever. Each date, the same: guzzle until my armor appears: the Knight of Cups. Cut through the silly coy performance, find common ground, and before the first date is over we are discussing heavy matters with ease – maybe I'm exploiting trauma by not being there for them down the road. I relive, record, and replay my early interactions and first impressions until the tape is worn out and fuzzy; made freckle; glitched by spilled liquor. Any charm present, filtered and processed into my worst qualities. The most pathetic and insecure facade. Arrogant, egoist, people pleaser. I seek reassurance in (past) lovers and friends. I struggle to keep the same energy (KTSE, for short) in the text world – it was not me but the version of me I believe she/they wanted. I burn out. Avoid and make excuses regarding school and work and the death of my grandmother – she passed away shortly after a first date. All that fantasy and butterflies and then nothing. Empty. I want to be nervous again – excited as my dad would say – transported into the overeager overthinking mind palace of something. Nothing. I still can recall, rehash, those first impressions. With each day I grow more sentimental, more nostalgic, and more cynical. Love is such a strong word – sentimental

too. I feel it quickly. In my life I loved them all, you all. The meme is real; the fantasy prior to the first encounter is made real – whether it meets desire or not – and then polyphonic possibilities appear everywhere. Person & Projects: newfound comfort of desire onto; and/or the desire to feel nervous again for; and/or the desire for someone else for; and/or compare and contrast with someone from before so. Pandora's box is open… the monkey's paw? I disappointed myself… and, if I were to be so bold and conceited, disappointed you too.

I put on "Life is Good" by Future (feat. Drake) and reveled in a quick dose of lavish misogyny.

As the morning passed into the afternoon, I made plans to keep myself busy and away from the endless scroll. I got drunk with my white friend with dreads. We were going to go to a metal show, but we got too stoned and scared so we just shot the shit about racism in black metal and debated woke culture in a generic agreeable way; a great autopilot conversation for the cross-faded. I looked at my phone before the dope-fear had dissolved to see I'd received a text from 'Andrea'. "Do you work tomorrow night?" She had responded. My weed brain told me to sit on it, but my psychoactive-enhanced heart took hold.

"I do not" I texted back.

"Great" she said, thankfully sans GIF. "Let's grab a drink?"

I've absorbed enough pick-up artist nonsense through osmosis to quickly assert myself. "7PM at Morty's?" an innocuous bar near the liquor store. 7PM because it was late enough to not commit to dinner. I hate eating in front of new people. Drinking is much easier.

8

I wore an understated beige turtleneck sweater and Shaggy Rogers khakis. I aimed for a put-together but unassuming attire. She wore a dress ostentatious only by 1950's standards plus hoop earrings. I'd need consultation to describe her make-up effectively, but all-in-all, she looked amazingly unfit to be sitting with a brick like me. Her body language was earnestly excited. If I could omnisciently see myself, I'd say my kinesics was uncomfortable until I got a drink in my hand, which quickly uninhibited the passion I suppress in formal encounters like this. I ordered a Sierra Nevada Pale Ale. It would be disingenuous if I were to drink wine. I am beer incarnate. She had sauvignon blanc, I

don’t remember which country. After the howdoyoudo niceties were over and our drinks had arrived, she began.

“Not a lot of men read fiction, in my experience”

“I just do it for attention,” I said before taking my inaugural swig. “I actually tuck Playboys between my books whenever I read in public” my prose may not suggest it, but I am silly and stupid.

“The paperback I gave you was pretty small, I don’t know how well it’d hide…” she hovered her cupped hands over her breasts and mockingly pushed up twice in reference to the massive tits often seen in adult magazines. “I never cared for Playboy”

“The writing didn’t cut it?”

“No, no, I just found Hustler way hotter” woah

“Really?”

“No!” She could see I believed her for a moment and was flustered. “I would never…”

“Me neither…”

We moved on and talked about the book, which felt trite. It was our MacGuffin after all, but discussing the intricacies of the novel felt benign, and neither of us seemed interested in starting our date with literary analysis. She asked me about my job. I recalled some stories of the Iranian man. My vaguely insensitive parody of his accent landed like a sissonne. She told me about traveling to Türkiye. I asked her why Türkiye. She said thanksgiving was her favorite holiday. I laughed. I told her my Iranian friend fled to Turkey for refuge after the war, then suggested plainly she was my 2nd favorite customer after the refugee alcoholic, which she seemed to like. I was on my third drink before I realized she had avoided discussing her current self altogether. And so, I began.

“What do you do?”

“I’ve done it all over the years, man, you name it.”

“I’m supposed to say prostitute at this point”

“Not that, no” she laughed.

“I mean, right now. What do you do?”

“You’ll never guess”

“I don’t know…”

“No coy bullshit, fire away”

“Government job” is an honest guess.

“No…”

“Uber driver?”

“Do I look like an Uber driver?”

“That’s racist”

“I didn’t mean it like that, it's racist for you to call it racist… anyhow, I’m a teacher”

“A teacher?” With an English degree brewing, I felt this was my inevitable outcome. Common ground. Not so bad.

“Yep. I teach English to new Canadians. I had planned to become a high-school teacher, maybe, but…” a parturient look of anguish flashed and faded. I thought about the difference between English and English in the context of learning. Western hegemony suggests English, as subject, is synonymous with literature whereas if one were to move to an English-speaking country from another nation that speaks one of the hundreds of other dialects, English would be self-evidently in reference to the language. She continued: “I settled without doing the post-graduate program, and I’m happy. Plus, they say it's the most hirable skill, to teach the language, if I were to ever move abroad” she said firmly.

“I think that's rather noble” realizing this was likely cliche, I added “I realize that sounds cliche, but I mean it... Wait, why would I never guess you taught English?”

“Because I laughed at your little character of the drunk Iranian guy. Maybe I’m projecting, but most young people, I assume, find that to be ‘problematic’” she said in quotes. “And it is, don’t get me wrong, but it's all context. Right, you're doing the voice of this specific guy. I don’t know, I don’t know, people your age…” she broached it, not me. “How old are you?” she had wanted to ask this ages ago, I surmised. But I felt there was a wrong answer to this question, and an answer was too low. I had only deduced that she was older than me, but not by how much, and what her age-gap-cap might be. Once, I smoked a cigarette with a metalhead Estonian woman while on my break. She

lived in the apartment building above, I assume. Her dog ended up pissing in my proximity which got us talking. We had a very funny conversation about the vulgarity of her grandmother's English. English, the language. She was very forward, told me I was handsome, and asked me when I got off. Then she asked my age, and it was too low, and I never saw her again.

"Twenty-six"

The command prompt in her mind processed the number. Then she said "I'm forty, just so you know"

"I figured you were the same age as me" I was lying.

"Shut up. Don't flatter me."

"Straight up. I do not care that you are forty"

"But you might…"

"I might?"

"There's a generation gap that just can't be closed"

"I don't know, maybe that makes it more interesting"

"I don't want to be fetishized, either"

"I'm not fetishizing. I'm just saying, I keep you hip, you keep me… I don't know, frugal?"

"I'm not a baby boomer"

"I'm keen to find out about Gen X"

"Aren't your parents Gen X?"

"When's the cut off?"

"I was born in the early 80's"

"You're a millennial!"

"Barely, I was… okay, whatever, it's all just a 'label'. We shouldn't box people in"

“That’s a very Gen X thing to say”. Concerns over ‘labels’ struck me as something a person who was in high school when Kurt Cobain died would say.

“I’m just getting it out in the open, I’m forty. You are not.”

“I appreciate the honesty”

“Thanks,” she wanted to continue, it seemed, but she moved on. “You can really pound 'em’ back huh?”

“I’m in the right profession”

The night continued, easy, breezy, and conversational. The subject of age only came up in regard to pop culture memory. “Oh my god, you were in kindergarten during Y2K”. I used that Kurt Cobain line later. I was pretty fucking drunk by the time we got the bill and overenthusiastically insisted I pay. She shrugged and let me cover the tab. I walked her home, and she invited me in for coffee. I’ll save the back-and-forth wherein I questioned if anyone ever really drank coffee so late in the evening or if that was just some old Hollywood euphemism because she did make me coffee in a very trendy pour-over rig that had the fruity acidic taste you get at third-wave cafes that I do not enjoy in the slightest as I’m accustomed to battery-acid methamphetamine Starbucks beans but gulped down hoping to sober up enough to feel it acceptable to stay the night. The caffeine did very little and the evening was a blur although I recall many laughs and painful honesty from myself that resulted in increasing kinesthetic touch from her. It came to be 2:30 in the morning while we listened to Sade, a mutual favorite, and I realized I had to go. I was still hammered, and it was just unbelievably bad form to have sex with someone, especially on a first date, this blasted. ‘I may seem lucid, but I am not. You don’t want me while I’m like this’. I told Andrea it was late and wished her farewell, to which she seemed disappointed, but understanding. I left and made it to the elevator before I turned back on autopilot. The night was loaded with quality banter, foreplay, and undeniable chemistry. It needed to end with a kiss. And I did exactly that before bidding her adieu once more.

I fell asleep listening to a live recording of Simply Red’s cover of “You Make Me Feel Brand New” on loop. I felt chemically anxious in the morning; deeply afraid I had fucked this up. But no, I brought my phone back from the dead, and saw she had already messaged me:

“I hope you don’t leave in such a hurry tonight”.

9

We spent the remaining months of the summer attached at the hip. I usually came over after work; she was nearby. We went to the movies, to restaurants, wherever excited lovers go. She convinced a cave-tanned me to spend time at the beach and on hikes. The beaches were never without wine. The hikes never without beer. We made silly voices and made fun of passersby for their clothes and moustaches and Mac DeMarco affect. It didn't, I admit, feel like friendship. She met my friends who refused to dodge the age gap. They playfully called her an 'oldhead' and an 'unc' and asked her about the second World War and not being able to vote. Andrea responded by miming rotary phone motions and speaking to the operator to call long distance. I was transitioning out of sloppy youth, while she transitioned into a self-confident middle age. We were fulfilling one another's unspoken needs, so I thought. What kills me is I forget so much of what we spoke of. Maybe it was the booze but, often, we were enraptured by an ethereal goofiness; an infatuated sing-song dance. Our effervescent present-tense way, like a pleasant mid-day nap dream. She'd let me ramble about creative ideas while neither inflating my ego nor ignoring me outright. She was very perceptive; I like to keep those parts of my personality isolated; the artist title is so self-serious. She kept me in check without mommying me. I recollect rambling to her about *The Disintegration Loops* and 9/11, largely plagiarizing Chris Ott's thoughts on the record, and instead of glazing over and saying "wow, so cool" she interrupted me to ask if I had heard about the frog. It went something like this:

> A frog goes into a bank and approaches the teller.
>
> He can see from her nameplate that her name is Patricia Whack. "Miss Whack, I'd like to get a $30,000 loan for a lily pad."
>
> Pattie looks at the frog in disbelief but takes a loan form out of her drawer. "May I please have your name?"
>
> The frog puffs himself up proudly. "Kermit Jagger, my dad is Mick Jagger and I'm a friend of the bank manager."
>
> Pattie's eyes widen, but she continues filling in the application. "Mr. Jagger, you will need to secure the loan with some collateral."
>
> "I have this," the frog says and produces a tiny porcelain elephant, about half an inch tall – bright pink and perfectly formed.

> Pattie blinks at the elephant several times. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to consult with the manager on this.” She takes the elephant and disappears into a back office.
>
> Pattie walks up to the manager. “There’s a frog called Kermit Jagger out there who claims to know you and wants to borrow $30,000, and he wants to use this as collateral.” She holds up the tiny pink elephant. “What in the world is this?”
>
> The bank manager looks back at her with a straight face. “It’s a knick-knack, Pattie Whack. Give the frog a loan. His old man’s a Rolling Stone”

I copied this from Reddit, but her take on the joke was much lengthier, including a meditation on the 2008 recession and its effect on amphibians. I later learned that this is a bit made famous by Norm Macdonald – I hadn't heard it before.

She was a semi-pro graphic designer, a Fiverr side-hustle, and a pragmatic one to boot. If you were to walk into a podiatrist's office or a kindergarten classroom, it's quite possible the poster about “integrity” or “positive thinking” was made, with keen capitalist smugness, by Andrea. I would try to pick her brain about them, and she would calmly shush me and give me a peck, and chalk it up to a “long story”, or a “gift from god”, or that “anyone could do it”. I don’t remember teaching coming up beyond little anecdotes about mispronunciations. “Been this / Penis”; that sort of thing. Her enigma maintained limerence's spell.

10

I took mushrooms a few times over the summer. Under the fungus’ spell, I nervously pondered her existence outside my own. Andrea seemed to only move *my* story forward. Obviously, I’m self-interested, but Andrea remained static. I had scratched some unreachable itch of hers, I guessed, but I was unaware of any visceral life-movement of hers outside of me. No fights with friends. No concerns about raises, co-workers, her general purpose, or the future. I’d talk anxiously about my education and ambitions, and she’d offer juju-free parables about self-actualization with minimal reference to her own predicaments and past. Come to think of it, I never met nor heard about the White Girl sangria girls after our first encounter.

Eventually, I got some background on her family. Her mom, Laurie, was the de facto familial refrain. Whether it be certain kinds of cheese, songs, or turns-of-phrase, Andrea happily cited them as reminders of the late Laurie Adamson. Early on, Andrea drunkenly told me Laurie was diagnosed with MS while she was in high school. She

hung on for almost ten years. Andrea's description of Laurie's symptoms towards the end was beyond harrowing. On the fly, Andrea composed her memories of mom into a thoughtful swansong with deep humanistic force. The thoughtful benevolence in which Andrea spoke of her late mother was in a class by itself. She called her father Patrick "an okay dad, but a great uncle". A portly hick-hippy hybrid of sorts. He remarried a few years ago. A big fat, kind Avon lady. Her older brother, she lovingly called a "jerkoff" and left it at that.

My moments of psychoanalytic reflection dispersed when I sobered up, although afterwards I pried more than usual to no avail. She was too funny; too astute to unguard on accident. She had a cheeky line, tiny reminiscence, or a clever non-answer that begot a change in topic.

One of her strangest circumventions was after I got out of the movies one day. I went to see a matinee of *Sonic the Hedgehog 2* by myself under the assumption that Andrea had no interest. For context, my hangover go-to for the better part of a decade has been to mindlessly consume video game YouTube. I graze various Sonic Reddit's and /vg/ threads from time-to-time in mouth-agape admiration of its fandom. That is to say, I had merit seeing this film beyond my rigorous cinema regiment you've discerned by now. The theater is my mecca to my Iranian friend's liquor store; thus, I had and always have avoided my phone for the film's shockingly long run time (a 122-minute kid's movie!). Andrea, as I learned after the screening, was hoping to meet up for deck beers. I had just spent two hours surrounded by a bunch of kids and parents so equilibrium was a must – the strictly adult activity of binge drinking with someone I was fucking. I called her instead of texting back; she preferred calls because she was born in the eighties.

"Hey! You at home? I'm downtown and just got out of a movie"

"Oh! What'd you see?"

I was hesitant to explain the derisive lens in which I approach *Sonic*, so I just said the title.

"Oh! I heard it was good!" she said casually, but with an air of knowing. I was startled. Andrea was a woman of culture, but not the memetic irony brain rot kind of culture. If *Women Talking* had released this summer, I'd be unstartled that she had consulted the critics given her proximity to Sarah Polley's age and, after consulting some interviews, their decidedly Canadian charisma, but a movie prominently featuring Miles "Tails" Prower was incongruous with the person I was beginning to fall in love with. I thus asked the simplest question.

“Did you see the first one?” Consciously trying not to sound pretentious and presumptuous made me sound pretentious and presumptuous.

“*Did you see the first one*?” She repeated back to me in a parody of my tenor voice. It was pretentious and presumptuous.

“I don’t know, that seems a little off brand to me”

“That I saw a movie?”

“That you saw the *Sonic* movie” I said with a brow furrowing befuddlement.

“It's a movie, Jake! I’ll watch anything!” This wasn't her typical clever maneuver, although evidence suggested it was true. We watched fourteen movies together to completion over the summer: *Mission Impossible 2* – the John Woo one with long-haired Tom Cruise; probably the worst of the franchise. *American Psycho* – directed by a Canadian woman! Joyce Chopra’s *Blonde* mini-series – two films technically; not sure why we watched this. It was free on the Roku Channel. *The Producers* – the Mel Brooks one; hilarious. *Dances with Wolves* – an old favorite of hers that proved to be demonstratively problematic in the time of truth and reconciliation, so *The Last of The Mohicans* was officially off the table. *Being John Malkovich* – digestibly weird, neither of us had seen it. *Slumber Party Massacre* – it’s no *Sleepaway Camp*. *Top Gun: Maverick* – I cried; she did not. *Big Hero 6* – she cried; I did not. She had seen it before and remarked that she had cried even harder on her first viewing. I suppose catharsis was why she chose it. *The Queen* – the guy who played David Cameron was hot, we both agreed. *Do the Right Thing* – I’ve yet to come across a contemporary film studies class that does not have this as their token Black-made film on their syllabus; not that I mind, Spike Lee is the man. *I am a Sex Addict* - my most buried hypersexual thoughts brought to life; anxious viewing. Don’t watch Caveh with your Girlfriend. She thought he was cute. I don't know about that. *Leaving Las Vegas* – tragic, beautiful, visceral, scary. *Don’t Let the Riverbeast Get You* – sent me down a rabbit hole on intentionality, ironic viewing, and backyard cinema I’ve yet to recover from; she thought it was incredibly annoying and fell asleep.

“Okay, sorry” I sensed I had annoyed her with my know-it-all pop culture ego as I had annoyed everyone who loved me with it before, so I relented. “I thought it was fun. It had the ADD trappings of a kid's movie, but a big heart”

“Yeah, I always thought Jim Carrey was hilarious. Before you were born…” she liked to say this a lot, and while I usually don’t take well to being patronized, it turned me on

– not in a ‘let’s unpack this’ mommy issues way; more akin to a ‘can you stay after class’ type porno. “He was on a show called *In Living Colour*…”

“Oh, I’ve seen *In Living Colour”* I had not seen *In Living Color* outside of YouTube, although I have watched the first season since. I find it odd that such an important, transgressive, Black-run sketch show is essentially impossible to view legally, at least in Canada. The Wayans got a bad hand.

“Have you seen *Dumb and Dumber?*” She asked.

“I have…” I thought she was going to call me ‘retard’.

“You kinda look like Jeff Daniels. I always thought he was cute” one could argue she had called me the r-word.

I watched *Something Wild* not long ago. Not only do I, in fact, look like Jeff Daniels, but she looks a bit like Melanie Griffth. I went over to her place, and we did not speak further about the second Sonic film.

11

I must, in the end, give my thanks to psilocybin, as it gave me emotional shock absorption when the manic pixie babushka revealed itself as a labyrinthine facade.

The summer came to a close. Life reverted back to the cyclical form of fall. I’m not much of a pastoral writer, but the orange leafy hue of autumn always comes at the exact right time; before the freedom of summer descends into chaos. Plus, I’m a Virgo. Andrea knew full well that I had quit the liquor store and hoped to work on campus in order to keep my work-school life in close proximity. Andrea’s teaching kicked back into gear, so she said. Once the first week of school rolled around in early September, we stopped seeing each other altogether. It was not by choice, on my part, as I was besotted by her presence. She became awkward and monosyllabic and distant via text. “Not tonight”, “Sorry. I’m not free”, “Maybe another time”, and the likes. I tried to call her, and she would not answer. It was a complete 180. A wall had come up. We had talked, over the summer, that our whirlwind romance was not sustainable come the fall; so perhaps she took that to heart and shut me out completely. At the time, she implied we’d find a way to make it work, but the time came, and she simply vanished without a trace. I was embarrassed, confused, and, as collateral, a scatter-brained freak. At the start of the semester, I got hired at *Cine Magic*, which serves as a popular cafe during the day and an art-house (their words not mine) theater in the evening, as both barista and

projectionist. I had, initially, a hard time ingratiating myself as the solitary straight white dude but found that my outward silliness and trademark lover-not-a-fighter manner ingratiated me to my new cohort. I was open with my coworkers about my intense age-gap romance and its sudden dissolution, and they were fascinated; xoxo *Gossip Girl* salaciousness fascinated. “The tea”. What I didn't tell them is how I fantasized and mentally rehearsed storming into her apartment and demanding an explanation every night before bed. I never did it, though. That, in this mortal plain, is fantasy-prone-personality-disorder blither. I’m not going to come over uninvited. If she doesn’t want to see me, then that is how it will be. By the third week of school, I had given up contact altogether. I continued to drink in excess, albeit alone. I watched rom coms while doom scrolling every night instead of studying because I wasn't showing up to any class I had before 1PM because I couldn’t get out of bed before noon. I found most of my solace and refuge in the companionship of youthful coworkers at the movie theater.

Cine Magic’s programming is more pragmatic than a curated art-house experience. For weekend matinees, for example, we play second-run kids movies. One of my first shifts was a busy screening of *Minions 2: Rise of Gru*. In early October, we got our paws on the second *Sonic* film. I had decided it would be funny to wear this mal-fitted bright blue Sonic t-shirt with Japanese text on it I had bought nearly a decade ago at Old Navy. Prior to the showtime, I sauntered down from the projection booth - I have been blessed with what is ostensibly a lock-and-keyed on-campus office - to display my occasion-appropriate shirt to my beautifully irony-poisoned Gen Z cohorts. I was guaranteed a pity laugh, in the same way a gentle dad joke might, but a teenager too old for the kid's matinee ran up to me first.

“Nice shirt!”

“Thanks man”

“Do you know what it says?”

“No… do *you* speak Japanese”

“(indecipherable Japanese)”

“Oh, wow”

“I called you a faggot” he said like a veteran of a *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* matchmaking.

One must skirt the edge when doling out street justice to a teen. My instinct was to push him then to use the rhetoric of my liberal humanities education to, in so many words, call him a homophobe. I settled on this: “Dude! Where's your mom?” I said it loud enough so mom, if she was present, could hear. To my utter shock and awe, the voice quickly uttering well-rehearsed sorrys was Ms. Andrea Adamson. I was stunned but couldn’t stop myself from smiling – I was delighted to see her again – and said my best heartthrob hello.

“I’m sorry about him”

“You’re kid?” I said, brimful with curiosity, confusion, and chagrin.

She sighed a sorrowful sigh that rang with regret. “Oh, Jake”

The boy looked up to his mom.

“How do *you* know *him*?” She ignored the little bastard and took pause to gather her thoughts.

“I can’t do this right now” she said at once to her son and to me.

I raised my eyebrows, stressed, and felt flushed with humiliation. I said what I gathered was the right thing - “I understand” - before she ushered her boy into the theater. I instantly felt no good, sick in the head, hot, and manic. I went back upstairs to the projection booth and hooked my Spotify up to the theater sound system. Normally, I play quiet, pretty music according to the tone of the movie; Stars of Lid if it’s art-house or Joe Hisaishi’s *Spirited Away* score if it's a blockbuster. With autonomy, I sent a little message to the secret mother sitting patiently with her potty-mouth preteen in the incandescent lights below via auxiliary cable: “Endless Love” - first the original, then the near-identical Mariah Carey and Luther Vandross version, than Dianna Ross solo, and before starting the film, as an assault on the senses of the *Sonic 2*’s patron, the *Glee* version. The stickiest love songs sound like mean schoolyard nursery rhymes when under the hotheaded spell of a dubious woman. The harmonious voices of Ross and Richie laughed, together, at my crushed spirit. I lied on the couch in the booth, letting Spotify automatically play Whitney Houston, Al Green, and Aretha Franklin’s biggest hits as I brewed in cyclical discomfiture. Feedback loop. Piecing this part of her puzzle – radio silence followed by the plot-twist of an unmentioned off-spring – a Bonafide retcon of my perceived Andrea – was not the direction of my brooding. Raw sensation. Pure emotion. Anger, affront. A spiritual fever. The passion cited in a ‘crime of passion’. A silent, unwitnessed kindergarten temper tantrum. Panic in isolation. Andrea, as memoric figure, transfigured from object of live-action affection to grotesque low-

polygon proportions. A rough time. I lay in melodramatic agony for a full hour, around the time Knuckles teams up with Eggman. The closed-circuit telephone buzzed, causing me to remember I was, on paper, at work, and had responsibilities, albeit not many. Deep breaths and mantric words of affirmation helped me answer the phone. I was told by a coworker, in a disoriented voice, that someone wanted to come up and talk to me. I asked them monosyllabically "why?" to which they replied, "I dunno". I gave them the go-ahead, and moments later, Andrea was knocking at my office door. I opened it to see a puffy-faced, hard-lamented matriarch unfamiliar in her visceral vulnerability. I offered her a seat on my couch which was left unheeded.

"Andrea…" I took a moment to choose my words precisely. Not too submissive, not too mean-spirited. "I'm all ears" I said before laying on the couch.

"It's complicated…" She stood at the door, ruby-red, shoegazing for a while. I simply waited. The tangible guilt she carried screamed loudly over the whirr of the projector and muted ambiance of *Sonic 2*. In the noise, the degradation that polluted my head moments ago was standing before me and seemed to slip away from me and into her. Finally, the Merzbow clangor of my office was silenced by her next utterance. "I'm so sorry"

I snapped at her: "sorry for what!?"

"For deceiving you… for, while not lying, but not telling the truth. I just… I… liked us as it was. It was so easy. If you knew… I don't know…"

"I have no idea how you could hide a child" Fleetingly, I thought of Pusha-T's infamous Drake diss track "Story of Adonis" wherein Pusha revealed to the world that Aubrey was hiding a bastard child he had had with a porn star. A wonderful WWE-esque era in hip-hop.

"I didn't hide him. I would never. I just didn't tell you. Which is wrong, I know that. But it's complicated"

"I'm listening," I said. Finally, she looked at me and came to sit on the couch. She carefully parsed my legs apart and lay on my chest before regaling her hidden past.

12

Andrea got married in her mid-twenties to her boyfriend of two years – a man named Brian – who I picture like the dog in *Family Guy* rather than a date-rapist NFL prospect implied by his name. An 'athletic dork', she called Brian, followed shortly by

‘obnoxious and lazy’ and ‘malleable but not by me’. He was a friend of her brother, named Stewart… Stewie… I bit my tongue. Her brother and boyfriend went to college together – business majors – I’ll refrain from generalizing about business majors as its childish, distasteful, and a plague on the young and college educated to apply astrological catch-all traits to individuals based solely on their discipline – together and played on the same beer-league soccer team. She met Brian after running into her brother and his peers on a night out; by met I mean fucked. Their relationship was fast-paced, intense, and ultimately volatile. When it was good it was passion; when it was not, it was frigid rage and passive aggression. She never called him manipulative, although if I were to read between the lines, it was inferred by his aloof behavior. He was an ‘acts of service’ lover, and she was, if only I knew, an ‘acts of service’ lover too. Marriage was her idea; she did it for her mom as a ‘parting gesture’ and put on a happy face whenever the couple were together with the Adamsons. Shortly after her mom died, Andrea got pregnant – not on purpose. Despite her openly anti-natalist sentiments, at the time, she could not bring herself to get rid of the baby – she put it off, let it grow, and grew attached to nurturing the thing inside her, akin, she told me, to a botanist’s love of a plant. Brian… not so much. He demanded an abortion immediately, or he would leave her to live as a single mother. She initially said she was on the same page, but as her relationship with the growing peony blossomed, she hesitated. His ultimatum resulted in the lonely birth of Harrison – named after Harrison Ford for no reason in particular. Shortly thereafter, howbeit, Brian attempted to resume his relationship with Andrea and begin one with his estranged child under the guise of a change of heart; Ms. Adamson only conceded to a mommy (slash) daddy paradigm instead of the mommy (plus) daddy he had proposed. Brian, to her chagrin, turned out to be a decent father and the two managed to co-parent effectively, and life continued for the disjointed family with manageable levels of dysfunction for the earlier years of Harrison’s life. Brian found himself cushy work as an analyst at a broker firm, hoping to eventually land himself on the trading desk. Andrea had a diploma in English and leveraged it to teach early-morning and night-classes to Canadians to-be. In these nine-or-so years, Brian got fat and online, and Andrea got fit and drunk. Details of Harrison’s upbringing were sparse; I gather she was accustomed to suppressing his existence when talking to me. In 2019, Brian was relocated to Hong Kong to secure the lucrative position as a trader as per the recommendation of his employer. Andrea insisted this was not a tenable way to co-parent. Brian told her she was sequestering his career prospects, which she ceded to, thus they came to the mutual agreement that Harrison would spend summers in Hong Kong, and the school year in Canada. I was the collateral of Andrea’s first post-pandemic summer romp – yes, there was lingering Omicron Covid-19 in the summer of 2022, sure, I know it well, as I was asked to enforce performative mask mandates and draconian vaccine-passport policies for no

further financial incentive at the behest of my increasingly distrustful provincial government to disenfranchised ideologues and confused geriatrics in myriad jobs I took throughout the pandemic, but anyone who didn't develop parasocial brain rot during their tenure of the virus began to revert to normalcy in full at this time. If Andrea was a Zoomer, she would have been trying to have a "hot-girl summer". That's why she flirted with me: Dick. She wanted to fuck around; and she did. She got her hot girl summer – without the implicit hypergamy[1] – but I already knew she had some harlot in her without the rest of the context through offhand stories of summer 2019 and preceding Brian.

All this information… I processed every disconcerting pause and cliffhanger ellipses from Andrea and I's romantic tenure. Ignorance is bliss, but sly allusion is curiosity, although easily suppressed. I don't want to know someone's exact body count, unless it's really low, for example, but I wouldn't mind knowing a rough idea of their historical sexual incontinence – culturally we like to pretend this is unimportant but it is a must to understand someone you're intimate with, and as long its determined there was substantive knowledge grown out of their post-coitally-empty pleasure seeking, I'm glad to know – plus it makes them fuck better. But this is a child born out of complex love. This is not the degree of privacy, of thoughtful omission; I prefer. Andrea was hiding a child. A whole history, like a bizarro edition of Illig's phantom time hypothesis, added to the posterity of her in a befuddling whirlwind revelation.

"Why didn't you tell me?" is all I could ask.

"This isn't my first rodeo, Jacob." She can call me Jacob. "Men your age, they don't like it. They don't like it all. And they're not off base; in that they are not fit to handle the presence of my kid in our relationship"

"So, you lied"

"So, I keep things uncomplicated"

"It's complicated now"

"How?"

"You ghosted me!"

"Don't give me that!"

“That’s exactly what you did”. Andrea sincerely didn’t know what ghosting was, so I gathered. "You just disappeared, without a trace. No closure”

She adjusted her posture to become upright and Athenian and diplomatic. “You’re right. You deserved better”

“This is scared behavior; this is what some acts like when their ashamed”

“I’m not ashamed of Harrison!”

“You’re ashamed of *me* – is what I meant”

“I’m not ashamed of you either”

“So, then what?”

She relaxed. Less Athena, mousier. “I don’t know how to be both…”

“Be a mom and a girlfriend?” I wish there was a better word than girlfriend at the ready. Partner is too contemporaneously LGBT; lover is too R&B.

“Yeah, something like that”

“I was game, Andrea. Warts and all.”

“You say that now, but…”

I interjected “but what? I’m too young”

“I fucked it up” she said before bursting into tears and falling into my couch-ridden arms. “I *am* ashamed”

I swallowed my frustration and said “You haven’t fucked anything up, Andrea. It’s okay. It’s not too late”. We began to make out.

13

The movie wasn't done, but it was close. Thankfully, I had seen it before, so certain lines about chaos emeralds had given us time to adequately canoodle. I walked down with her through a back exit so as to not alarm my coworkers; allowing her to slip back into the theater unnoticed. I was red-hot embarrassed and remained vertical.

“We’re going to have to do this again”. I guess now we’ve seen 14 and a half movies together.

She texted back shortly thereafter: “I’ll call you tomorrow”.

The poeticized neurosis of preeminent romance from the early summer was overrun with a comforting feeling of return. The grass is greener on the other side, but I quite liked my lawn as it was. Except my yard is now a muck with a preteen. A preteen who introduced himself by calling me a fag. Gay marriage was illegal when I was Harrison’s age[2]. I thought about the balance here. Do I have to be extra quiet? Do I have to go to the park with him? No, he’s too old for the park. I’d go see whatever the next equivalent to the Sonic film[3] is with a preteen boy, I guess. Maybe I could be a good role model. His father… his father… his father… How can I compete? I don’t have to compete. I must be upstanding. Like an ugly dog that speaks the same language as me. This was not neuroticism. This was a feeling of pragmatic continuum.

Andrea called the next day as I was making myself breakfast and reading an advanced PDF copy of *The Novelist* by Jordan Castro on my phone. I cut the hello-how-are-yous short and asked the question at the forefront of everything.

“Does Harrison really speak Japanese?”

She laughed. “I doubt it”.

“Okay. Good.” The sentiment that a rude Gaijin child could speak fluent Japanese rubbed me the wrong way; I appreciate that it was a bit.

“Man…” she said after a little more friendly banter. “I don’t know how we can do this”

“But you want to?” I was too eager.

“I do.” She said firmly and sternly.

“Whatever you're comfortable with, whatever it takes, I’m just not down… not able… to go full stepdad”

“I wouldn’t expect that”

“But I can be good. I can be… not weird. I can deal”

“Okay. Well, he’s gonna be around, you understand that?”

“I do.”

“We can’t be getting hammered all the time like we were before”

“Well… *I* can” I joked.

“Sure, yeah, but keep it yourself. I can’t afford a lot of babysitting. I can’t…”

“The balls in your court, Andrea. This is on your terms. Not mine”

“The best I can offer is: I’ll see you when I can”

“Fine by me”

14

Sneaky Link (according to Urban Dictionary)

> A term most popular in Gen Z and onwards, “sneaky link” is a combination of the verb to link (which means to meet up/hang out) and sneaky (which means to be discreet).
>
> Because of the nature of how these two terms interact, the compound noun “sneaky link” is commonly used to refer to a hookup, though it can also be used to describe a friends-with-benefits relationship.

15

There is a rational though fetishistic appeal to a sneaky link. Certainly, it was arousing to be subjected to the spontaneous late-night wants and needs of Andrea but uncertain, I was, during all the tenuous times between. I was hidden from Harrison, and by proxy, hidden from the world. I was a necessary discomfiture in Andrea’s motherly life. Evaporated from the wet-hot summer into the cloud of fall’s unknowing lasciviousness. I mastered the art of tippy toes. It was not the same – nothing between us was. Our relationship devolved into biweekly hook-ups and fresh-faced grotesque sexting. I was nebulous.

To counter my self-image as a dejected starry-eyed hanger-on, I engaged in a rigid practice to harness my carnal chakras. I did ‘no-fap’, for lack of a better term, to retain excitement whenever I was privileged with Andrea’s time. This extended to eating excessive red meat, fish, and canned oysters, doing calisthenics with a focus on the hip

flexors, and unsatisfied pornography binges. Despite Web M. D's suggestion that booze was a surefire way to decrease my libido, my empirical evidence suggested otherwise. I've speculated amongst my friends about hangover hard-ons at length. Finally, in this tenure of occasional high-stakes sex, I looked into it. The body overcompensates from the loss of testosterone during the drunken state by increasing greatly. The results were mixed: hyper-fixation on sex and a contemptible disposition, but boundless energy. For two months, I was stuck in a flux between romantic rage and gooey satyromania. There was no time to talk shop, only time to get it done and run off before the teenaged boy could find a doughy projectionist satisfying his mother. 60 days of haphazard rendezvous isn't something to scoff at, yet it left my spirit woefully unfulfilled. As fall fell into winter, I prepared to cut things off. This was not working for me. I was passive aggressive, catty, leaving her lustful text messages unreplied overnight and giving sheepish answers to questions about my day in the morning. Instead of drinking together in balmy exaltation, I chugged tall cans of hard iced tea because she couldn't smell it on my breath as I walked to her place. The sex felt phallocentric and anonymous. I had made myself an enigma. A puzzle for her to solve. And she would try and pry, but I would feign my best indifference with much colder dismissals than her warm social parrys. Fast-forward to early November, following a tight-lipped mezzo piano release, she offered me an unanticipated invite back into her world; a coupled world beyond the interior the trappings of her domicile: a BBQ at father Patrick's with her brother Stewie in attendance.

"Is Brian gonna be there?" I said, peevish.

"He's in Hong Kong as far as I know" she said with disdain.

"As far as you know?"

"When I have Harrison, I don't talk to him. He plays games with him online, I think, but I don't need him helicoptering me. It's better this way, believe me"

"Okay…" I swallowed my curious pride. "I understand. For the best…"

"It is" she followed this up with an explanation of my role. "You need to be normal. Not that you're not normal… I made a face as if to interrupt. "I mean to say you can't be too boyfriend-y"

"Why?"

"Harrison's gonna be there. He's going to recognize you"

“How do you know he’ll remember me”

“You were wearing that fucking shirt” she said like we’ve had this conversation before. We had not. “The fucking hedgehog shirt”

“Does he remember that?”

“Well, he asked me about it a couple of times. He’s not a kindergartener, you know. He’s very much a person now, which is still a shock to me. He wanted to know how I knew you”

“What’d you say!?” I was on the edge of my seat. This scene would be an anecdote I’d have regaled in our pitiful gab, no doubt.

“He asked if you were one of my students”

“Jesus Christ” I said like cartoonish disbelief.

“I told him you were an old friend”

“Did he press?”

“He said ‘you don’t have any old friends’” she imitated him South Parkishly.

“And?”

“And I told him ‘There’s a lot you don’t know about me, kid’” she imitated herself in the fatherly stylings of a 1950s noir detective. “But he asked a couple more times about the ‘tall…” she paused. “*Loser* in the Sonic shirt” her pause implied the word ‘fag’ or ‘faggot’ as he had called me in our sole interaction. “I gave him the answer every time”

“So, he’s curious about me?”

“Yep”

“And he hasn't noticed a tall, handsome *loser*’s presence in his home?”

“Not out loud, no. But I doubt he would say anything about momma’s boyfriend. If I was him, I wouldn’t wanna know” I can’t explain it to you, but the way she said ‘momma’ sent a shiver through my nipples trickling through my gut. I kissed her with a renewed sense of love so missing from our sneaky link fall.

“He wouldn’t wanna know about this, huh?” I whispered while running my tongue under her earlobe and flicking her earring, before going down on her for the first time in some weeks.

The details of the party were sparse. It was a Christmas party. The invitees were a mixed crowd of people from her brother, father, and stepmother’s lives. It was family-oriented – people her age have kids – and potlatch-style, but she anticipated heavy drinking, even drug use. Her father was not above a doobie and some psilocybin, maybe more, she told me. I was reassured knowing I could cut loose in her family’s company. Yet, this premise made me fretful to the point of occasionally forgetting it was to take place altogether. It was coming up in early December.

16

I was spending time with my friend Lee in the fall. Lee is a low stakes hang. He didn’t care that I drank 15 beers while he got stoned on Kratom. We usually watched movies on Tubi, stayed up until four AM, and reveled in uncensored cynicism. After nights with Andrea, I would see if he was up. On this occasion, I went over to Lee’s because he wanted to show me the new *Pokémon Violet* – maybe it was *Scarlet* - because we had played this *Pokémon Unite* game together a bit, and he thought I was more invested in the franchise than I was. I didn’t really care about Pokémon in 2024 - I cared about it in 2004, but it's the zeitgeist - someone’s zeitgeist - and we could chat while he mindlessly grinded. Lee had upgraded from the legal-gray area pseudo-opiate that-is-Kratom to the totally legal prescription meth that is Adderall via a sketchy pay-to-play doctor he had found on Yelp. He offered me some, and we sat, until the sun came up, ripped off legal speed, and hyper-fixated on Pokémon - mostly reminiscing about how it used to be better. He suggested I borrow his 3DS to try out some of the games I had missed since abandoning the franchise post-*Ruby/Sapphire*. On Lee’s suggestion, I jailbroke the handheld with the last of my Adderall buzz when I got home. Lee, while a real-deal gamer and a veteran of the internet, is not inclined towards jailbreaking, homebrew, and piracy due to his collector’s spirit - he likes having em’ all lined up on his bookshelf to organize and admire, and, so he says, re-sell for a profit one day. He knew I could get the job done because I’d done it before to his disbelief: “How could someone who doesn't even game mod a console?” I had modded my Nintendo Wii so I could play *Smash Bros Melee* with my EVO enthusiast friend Lance when he came to visit me some time back. *Smash Bros Melee*, in the box, costs between 70 and 100 American dollars twenty-two years after its release. Modding the Wii cultivated a couple hours of cheap nostalgia, but what I liked most was eschewing the marked-up eBay retro game market. That, and the tinkering.

17

Lee also gave me some Adderall to finish off the semester in full effect.

I had an exam the same night as Patrick's BBQ, but it was early enough that I'd show up before it was unfashionably late after the alcohol had brought everyone's walls down. I took 35 milligrams of Adderall – the maximum dose recommended in a day by the FDA for someone significantly lighter than me – which amounts to three pills and a fourth carefully halved and poured under my tongue shortly before the 4 pm exam. Amphetamines work, and they work on me notably well. I see why Adolf Hitler, John F. Kennedy, W.H. Auden, Jean-Paul Sartre, Ayn Rand, George "EST Gee" Albert Snow III, Judy Garland, Nayvadius "Future" DeMun Cash, Justin Bieber, my friend Lee, Sergio "Gunna" Kitchens, Danny Brown, the mother character in Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream*, fighter pilots, pilot pilots like Denzel Washington in *Flight*, and probably Joe Biden before a speech take the stuff. The exam was on Milton.

A side effect of Adderall is sweat, also a symptom of my 28.1 BMI score. I planned ahead. I had a change of clothes: from my pit-stained plain white tee and black jeans to corduroys and a collared golf shirt. I had a plastic coke bottle filled with white wine that I knocked back to take some of the Adderall edge off. I was so ready. Amped up. Game time. Andrea was already there, so I bussed across town towards her father's place. I listened to *The Life of Pablo*, skipping the introspective gospel of "Ultralight Beam" in favor for the hedonistic escapism of the "Father Stretch My Hands" one-two punch, while occasionally queuing up my favorite cuts from *Yeezus* as to keep my energy up. "I'm In It" blaring in my headphones, I couldn't help but to mumble along to Assassin's patois assault: "I'm a badman if you know say / Disrespect we no tek". Never will I not be agasp at the raw vulgar imagery of "Stick my fist in her like a Civil Rights sign" followed shortly thereafter with Ye's braggadocious explanation of his penetrative technique: "then grabbed it with a slight grind". Kanye West is like Espresso… I was double stimmed up. Finally, I arrived, heartbeat high and artificially sweetened self-confidence higher.

As I approached the welcoming family-sized California bungalow, I pondered texting Andrea to give forewarning that I was about to enter, to give proper introductions. However, I was not given such liberty. A man with cheekbones of Andrea, I could only presume her brother Stewart, was smoking a cigarette out front and yelled over.

"You the kid fucking my sister?" he said with enough folksy brashness to be endearing rather than full of contempt. Normally, it would've caught me off guard before I could

sink into a game of boys-will-be-boys banter, but I processed his tone awfully fast, faster than usual.

“Who’s asking?” I said, pointing at his cigarettes and gesturing as if to ask for one. Meeting acerbic people for the first time always makes me take on this accent-less Southern charmer phraseology, almost like an invisible wheat-straw tangled from my lips as I replied. Stewie was privy to this phenomenon and donned the same virtual suit, passing me a cigarette and lighting it for me.

“Pretty girls don’t light their own smokes” he said, winking at me before taking a drag himself. “I’m her older brother, Stewart” he said, and we shook hands firmly and properly.

“Jake”. He eyed me up.

“You aren’t the young buck I was expecting”. This was his way of calling me fat. The pre-coital Twisted Teas I had been consuming in the past months had added up discernibly. I estimate I was drinking an average of eight units a day, mostly binges on the weekend of twenty-five-plus; primarily Bud Lite and the aforementioned hard iced teas. Averaging the 440 calories in a Twisted Tea and the 80 in a Bud Lite, if I say I drink them at an equal ratio, that's 14560 calories a week, or 7.25 pounds of empty weight.

“I’ll take it as a compliment” I really didn’t shine in my early twenties all that bright – youth is not a desire of mine. I often think about the American cultural paradigm of the strapping silver-fox against the desperate declining older woman – I don’t believe it to be true but as a man I like that we’re instructed to believe the former. The wise, middle-aged prostitute in de la Iglesia’s *Navajeros* is an example of how other cultures see older women as sage, experienced, and beautiful in contrast to the stranger than fiction endless pursuit of youth via cosmetic surgery one sees in the *Real Housewives of (whatever city)*.

Stewart was gripping a bottle of Soju. Uncharacteristically weeb-like – westerners who drink Soju are usually the type to post 100s of Instagram stories a day that I only click through if they’re a hot nu-E-girl that shows their boobs amidst memes of being mentally ill, Kawai art, and screengrabs of hyperpop artists trying to fuck them. I gestured at the bottle with an ironic knowingness.

“You want some?”

Not really, but “Sure”

“It just levels me out, the sugar, relative to the hard stuff…” he said hard stuff with knowing experience, like Hunter Biden would. Stewart had a coked-up gym rat way about him, with a twinkle of action-figure collector in his physiognomy – like he played *Pokémon GO* during an ultramarathon and had a call-girl waiting for him at the finish line. Not an archetype, but a fusion of many.

“Have you ever had those hi-chew candies?” I was shit-testing to see if he was a dork.

“Yeah, sure, those little Jap candies” he knowingly used ‘Jap’ as a slur, I’m sure.

“Tastes like that” ignoring the antiquated racial epithet.

He took another swill, ignoring my keen palette. “Before we go in and you meet everybody…” I wondered what sum everybody added up to. “I got to ask you something”

“Sure,” I said, not too eager for whatever this polyphonic man was about to ask me.

“Is it true what she says?” That I met the kid? I wrongly thought. He let the question pregnantly hold for a whole tone until I answered this should-be rhetorical musing.

“What does she say?” No gossip-y curiosity was present in my tone.

“That you got a big dick and like to fuck her doggy-style?” he slapped my back, laughing big and masculine. Maybe, just maybe, I like this guy. This guy would find my patois funny. "No, no, don’t answer that, I’m fucking with you, let's go in.” I speculate he was trying to put me at ease, misreading my clicking Adderall jaw for nervousness - I was so dialed - I could have ran the world bank without a deficit. He walked me through the doors, popping in a mint beforehand, and let no moment of tranquility leading up to my general introductions take place. “The long hair is here!!”. I heard a half-dozen grown-up ‘woos’ and an iconic groan come from Andrea. The front entrance was a pile of shoes and mat preceding a kiddie corner into an open-concept main floor. Andrea pitter-pattered over before I could be seen by the other partygoers.

“You met my brother than, huh…” she sized up Stewie to sense how much he had fucked with me. Addressing him she asked, “What’d you ask him?”

“If he had a big cock and liked to fuck… uh, from behind” he smirked. She rolled her eyes as if to say ‘this going to be a long night’ and I smiled back as if to say ‘this is much better than Victorian decorum and dessert forks’. She linked arms with me, like middle-schoolers dancing to the Breakfast Club soundtrack and escorted me into the main room. There were families galore, kids ranging from three to thirteen; I’d wager.

The anti-natalist crowd isn't *exactly* my cup of tea, but I'd much prefer to parley with them than be surrounded by the stressed-out mania of a parent's party. Lucky for me, the ominous murder of parents was neigh without drink in hand. They proved to be a cordial bunch. Patrick quickly waddled his way towards me, holding his hands behind his back.

"Alright, Jakey, pick a hand" Jakey… jesus christ.

"Left"

"Good choice…" he said in a creepy falsetto before revealing a middle finger and chuckling like a pilled-out Rodney Dangerfield. "Gotcha fucker!!!" he said before revealing his left-hand had a cold Bud Lite. "You got some catching up to do, bud, I got a helluva buzz brewing…" and passed me the cold one. "It's nice to meet you, pal, I'm Patrick"

"Pleasure's all mine. Thanks for having me"

"Buncha old fucks, man. What I would do to be your age again… What're you, 25?"

"Pretty much, yeah"

"Well, here's hoping we don't cramp your style" he held up his drink to cheers. "Andrea hasn't brought a new man around since Harry was born. I thought she was a Dyke, for sure. I mean look at her hair! Like she's bought to rip up a picture of the pope and quit shaving her legs! Nah, nah, I'm just messing with you. I'd be fine if she was a dyke, I mean, I guess she sort of is, look at your hair! Jesus, bud, get a fuckin' hair cut!" He played with my hair in jest.

"Nah, Jake's got a fuckin' hog on em'. Just ask Andrea," added Stewart.

"You get enough of these in me," I gestured with the can. "You just might get to see it…" I said, bravely matching their locker-room talk.

"Jesus jiminy cricket!" Pat yelled whilst slapping his knee. "Andrea! Sweetheart! You didn't tell me he was retarded like your old man!". Pat was a stubby, lovable man. He had the energy of a veteran open-mic host at a trampoline park; think Don Rickles' Mr. Potato-head, a guy who collected dirty joke books, and a sports-dad who yells at the coach. As her father continued on, Andrea's presence was demanded by another guest, away from the testosterone. "Well, fuck, Andrea's been tight-lipped about you. I know you're a bit, oh, youthful, although you look like shit!" He chuckled again. "Sorry, sorry.

I'm a jokester. It is what it is. I can tell you don't mind" he's right. "Anyways, what's your deal? You go to school?"

"That's right, yeah. I study English"

"But you speak it perfectly fine! Nah, I'm kidding. You read books, right? I went to school. Civil engineering. Barely passed. Smoked my whole way through it. Ended up in sales. I know Andrea likes to read. Sometimes. Read those books her mom liked too. The prejudiced one. With the mansions and Mr's and Ms's. You know the one? I saw the movie with that girl. The flat-chested one from those Jack Sparrow movies. You here that Johnny Depp wife shit? She shit in his bed. Sounds like he had himself a fuckin' handful. Bet the box was phenomenal, though. You seen it? The one with the pretty English girl with no tits? I bet you have long-hair! Nah, nah, I'm just pullin' your leg, champ. All girls like to read… something about it just gets em' flickin' their bean. Pardon my French. After Laurie passed, I had this girlfriend, man, real dog. Got her one of those e-book readers from Amazon. Always reading werewolf porn. Got her right going. Not my daughter, though. Never ever. She's a nun, as far as I'm concerned. If I was one of them voodoo desert Africans I'd have her kamasutured shut. You think authors get a lot of pussy? Seems so private and depressing. Not like a rock star, or something. Writer groupies? Seems far-fetched, I don't know, man. Sorry, sorry. I'm a little drunk. I know you can't say stuff like that anymore. I'm hip, I'm hip, just a little old. Just babbling. You seem like a nice kid… though, not fucking with you, man, can I even call you a kid? You've got a beer belly, I can see, like me (shakes his belly). That ain't no kid's belly, no way. Hold on, here, one sec, lets go over to the kitchen we'll do a shot" Marker's mark. 2 ounces each. Down the hatch. "Anyways, what's up? What's going on? How'd you meet her? She just told me some tall stud was coming by and to go easy on 'em. You met the kid? Bit of a freak. He's here somewhere on his Gameboy. Probably looking at those japanese titty videos, or something. I mean, hey, I can't judge. Just a little young, you know, but with the internet and all, I can't blame em' for being curious. I was no saint at his age either, if you're surprised! Fuck, let's get you beer, man, you look a little light (shakes my beer belly). You okay?" He grabbed me a beer and cracked it for me. "So, what was I sayin… oh, yeah, how'd you two meet?" I sipped the beer, seeing if he would continue.

"I worked at the liquor store. She would come in to buy wine"

"That's my girl! Comes by it honestly, if you can't tell. Ha! You give her a discount?" What a funny thing to ask, I thought.

"I gave her a lot more than a discount!"

“Jesus, bud! I’m her dad! You can’t say that!”

“You just said ‘girls who read flick their bean’”

“I didn’t say that”

“You did!”

“Well ...yeah, sounds like me. Ol’ motor mouth. You’re right, ha. Anyhoo, liquor store… huh? You get a lotta boozehounds like me there, I bet?”

“No doubt” I thought of my Iranian friend - really, he was no different from Pat - both babbling baboons with a crass profundity about them. “Where’s the kid?”

“Fuck if I know! Downstairs pullin’ his little pud? Gotta tell you man, he’s my favorite grandson, (it was his only grandson), but kid’s weird, man. Maybe it's a generational thing, maybe I’m getting old, but that boy’s got a darkness, man, that he didn’t get from me”

“Maybe you just gotta find common ground with him. I dunno… does he like sports?”

“Fuck no, not unless it's some cartoon playing it”

“He’ll come around. Teens, you know. They have their esoteric phases, or whatever”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re probably right. You met him, right?”

“Just the once.”

“Well, man, that's a big step for Andrea.”

“I mean, it was by happenstance. He, uh, called me a faggot in Japanese”

“Well, at least he’s got Grandpa's sense of humor”

We laughed. He gave me a handshake and babbled about who he had to accost next before bouncing off. I looked around for Andrea, but she was deep in conversation with some rotund mother; transfixed in conversation about PTA meetings, I assumed. She had this unfamiliar gaze upon her; a look I had not seen since my last interaction with the parental public; a dramatic, faux-sincerity that proud adults put on when competing with one another. I was getting kinda fucked up. I wanted to know who was on the aux. They were doing a wonderful job; The Cure was playing. “One Hundred Years”. A deep cut. It couldn’t be Patrick. Maybe it was Andrea. I wandered around for evidence, pounding

my beer, hoping to strike up meaningful conversation about something I was actually interested in. Evidence of an NPR dad, maybe. Someone in Uni-Clo with thick rimmed glasses. A shaggy Ira Glass type. A few contenders were around, but they were all lost in their conversations. I wondered if it was actually a BBQ, or if I had missed out on the food. I wasn't hungry. I hate eating with a good buzz on. I wondered if Patrick used the n-word, and if so, was it ironic. I decided to find the bathroom on my own, not wishing to ask a stranger and opening up another opportunity for someone to poke fun at my age. I wondered what song was coming next; The Smiths is on this playlist no doubt, Joy Division too. When I'm Patrick's age, I'll demand Young Thug be played at these types of gatherings. I found the upstairs, and heard chatter, perhaps enjoying a civil conversation free from the cacophony of generations. I got into the bathroom, sipped some water from the tap, and looked at myself in the mirror - you're chubby man, you should grow a beard - and washed my face with cold water before taking a piss. My dick was not going to get hard tonight as I gripped my sloopy slug. I mumbled the lyrics to "New God Flow" to myself while I pissed. "I believe there's a god above me, I'm just the god of everything else!". It kept my confidence high. I admired the old man's drugs, hoping to find something fun. Nothing I could identify, at least. I shook my ultra flaccid penis off, washed my hands, and exited the bathroom. I peaked my head into the upstairs room where three guys and Stewie were shooting the shit, showing each other stuff on their phone, and having a ball. The room had posters of old NFL players, cut-out Sports Illustrated swimsuit models, and dirty laundry on the floor. It smelled like Old Spice and old cum."You guys need some more drinks?"

"Yeah, actually, that'd be sweet. We're waiting for at least some of the kids to fuck-off before we really send it" said one of the guys. He paused, sized me up, and asked. "You the dude fucking his sister?" pointing his thumb at Stewie. I smiled and admitted guilt.

Stewie piped up, repeating his catchphrase: "Yeah, and he's got a big cock on him too. You should see it, man, Jesus." He held his hands comically far apart while making a down-syndrome face. The irony made my belly laugh. My cock is but a chicklet for the night.

Another one of Stewie's non-descript buddies awkwardly added "Can you get me a Miller? Those are mine. Help yourself, too, man" he sounded like if Patrick Star who bet on the Grey Cup.

"What about you two?"

"Just grab one of my dad's bottles. He's too pissed to notice," said Stewie.

"Alright, be right back"

Downstairs, the music had modernized. Vampire Weekend. The new stuff. “This Life”. This life, man. There’s an aging hipster amongst us. I bet he’s fucking wasted too. IPAs, that's what those guys drink. They taste like vaporized weed, otherwise referred to as ‘a profile of grapefruit & melon and restrained malt notes’, but they are high test. I’ve been kicked out of bars after drinking IPAs; I don’t get kicked out of bars drinking lager. “You've been cheating on, cheating on me. I've been cheating on, cheating on you” the song rang out like a siren; it reminded me of my first girlfriend. Boy, this was different, but not so different. There was the dubious shadow and revelation; having a kid is a whole lot better than having her thirty-year-old boss. I bet Andrea and I’s age difference is about the same as theirs was. I forgive her. The song changed gears quickly into general self-confrontation about slackers sliding on through their eponymous life. Man, I gotta talk to this guy. This song does rule. I never gave *Father of the Bride* a fair shake. This dude’s kinfolk. I looked to see if someone had their phone out, obsessively queuing up the Alabama Shakes next. I looked for a well-kempt beard; it's Movember after all. I looked for a fat John Cusack. I looked for a drunk-red-face mumbling along to the song only the two of us knew - if he had gone with “A-Punk”, he’d just be the radio, instead he plays the unfamiliar with the familiar Paul Simon riffage. This guy knows his stuff. I darted around, saying friendly hellos to everyone as they talked amongst themselves. It was loud. These people were loud. The song changed to Nightmares on Wax; a trip-hop artist on the more downbeat, loungier side of things. “You Wish”; a flip on “Something's Got A Hold On Me” by Etta James. I’ve always found this genre of chillout turntable-y electronic music rather cheap, but serviceably chill and palatable in an ambient sense. I get it, maybe it's so loud now the music doesn't really matter. Maybe it's a palette cleanser before he amps it up with, like, Faith No More or something. I passed the fridge… right… beers. Maybe it's one of the guys upstairs on the aux. No, wait, they had their own music going. Toby Keith, I think. That's fine too. I can party to that. “BBQ stain on my white tee-shirt”. Maybe, I’ll meet this guy later. But… Where’s Andrea? I don’t see her anywhere. I opened the fridge and grabbed two Millers and two Bud Lites. Boy, there sure is a fuck ton of beer in here. I opened the freezer, and there’s two bottles of Jack unopened, some White Rum half-drank, and four… Four bottles of Oyster Bay. Jesus Christ. Is that just for her? No… no… you worked at a liquor store, man, it's a stereotype. That's what functionally alcoholic women drink. Okay. Got the Jack, four beers - two for me. Maybe, fives the move. I shouldn’t be shooting Jack with these guys. I gotta touch base with Andrea. But, fuck, there waiting on me now, how longs it been? Quickly, I grabbed a fifth beer, tucking two into my respective right and left back pockets, and moseyed on back upstairs without being accosted.

“Took your fucking time!” said Stewie as he reached out for the bottle. He popped the top, and took a swig. “Hold up, let me get some chase…” spoken like a true alcoholic.

In my younger days, I always thought it was pussy-shit to drink mixed drinks, but as I've become a guzzler myself - one who avoids IPAs because they knock me out too quickly - I realize there's some strategy to the Jack-and-Coke. It goes down easy, it keeps you from puking, and it paces you out. He gunned out the room and shuffled down the stairs with a comfortably loud stomp only someone who's climbed those stairs for a lifetime would perform. A brief hush fell upon the other lads as I passed out the beers and they nodded silent thank yous. It was awkward, as Sam Hunt hummed under the game of conversational chicken. These lads were nondescript, portly-but-well-groomed, and, clearly, gambled online. One of them, finally, spoke.

"How are you enjoying yourself?"

"It's fine, for sure, but a bit chaotic, man…"

"Man, it gets pretty crazy at the Adamson's place sometimes. Just you wait…" said the other guy, less porty, less well-groomed, but with a cordial essence emanating from his Jeffrey Dahmer glasses.

"What kind of crazy?"

The first guy reached into his pocket and stopped before pulling anything out. "You're cool, right?"

I've lived a life, so I didn't hesitate. "Blow?"

"Oh, so you party-party, huh?" said the first guy, chuckling. I didn't answer.

"We gotta wait, though, I mean, I'm not a saint, but like, it's just not chill to go totally HAM with all the kids around"

"Makes sense," I said awkwardly. I thought about whether I would do some blow with these guys.

"Anyways, man, I'm Kevin, and this fucker's Sammy. Nice to meet you;"

Sammy added as he outstretched his hand for an outback shake "Been sometime since I met someone fuckin' Brian's sister". The rag-on-the-sisters-boyfriend schtick was getting old, but I chuckled and hit em' back.

"Been a while since I shook hands with a queer couple" I said, unconscious, with a faux southern drawl. They liked it.

“I been fuckin’ him up the ass since the 8th grade”

“Dude, shut the fuck up, I’m for sure the top” replied Sammy.

“How the fuck do you know what a top is?”

They went back and forth like this for a bit before I interjected without thought: “You guys friend’s a long time?”

“Oh, yeah, man, forever. We all went to school together,” said Sammy.

“Right on, cool, yeah, me and buddies from high school still hang out too” I said, trying not to sound insincere. It's always been quietly depressing that I have the same friends, yet, I can’t imagine the other-way-around is any less tragic. “So you guys know Andrea’s ex then?” it was lingering in the back of my mind; I was unaudited; I dove in.

“Oh, fuck, man. I dunno…” they seemed like they didn’t want to open that can of worms just at the moment. “What’s taking Stewart, anyways?”

“Hold your fucking horses,” Stewart said in the nick of time. “I’m here, I’m here. My dad was going off about Trudeau, I dunno, whatever, he’s hammered. Are you a liberal?” he said, pointedly, towards me.

“Not tonight” I said, like I was finishing a lyric to one of these country songs purring in the room.

“Good! Man, not to sound like ol’ Patty, but I couldn’t handle one of those fuckin’ snowflake retards dating Andrea; she’s got all these tattoos and stuff, and I just imagined her little-baby boy-toy would be one of these painted nails freaks they themming and all that horseshit; just had to check man”

“I get it, the long-hair’s a misnomer, I’m used to it, man. I’m in college. I’m surrounded by it. I speak the language, and I agree with some of it, for sure. I get it. I dunno”.

“Anyways, on the subject of Liberals, Andrea’s looking for you.”

“Is she mad?” I asked sincerely. I’d been AWOL in her family's house. I haven't spoken to her son yet, who I presume is somewhere in this clown car of a home.

“Didn’t seem like it, she just seemed hammered, man, but what do I know”

“Thanks” I said, and scurried off without thought.

“You come back now; if you wanna come skiing with us later” said Sammy mimicking my southern drawl from earlier.

I hustled downstairs at a polite velocity. Andrea was by the fridge, talking with her dad and two women her age - not as waifish and unorthodox in appearance but, with an engaged whimsy comparable to Andrea’s. These were her friends analogous to her brother’s cowboys I met upstairs. They were ragging on Trump in simple prose; at this epoch, it is just noise, but to an older generation, his utter lack of decorum is still a shock. He hasn't been the president for like two years. I was surprised Pat was agreeing with them, but put together that he had a distaste for his exorbitant wealth. I jumped in.

“Hold on, Trump’s running again?”

“You didn’t hear?” said one of Andrea’s friends agasp with a valley girl twang.

“But you’re so plugged in? How can you be going on about so-in-so albums coming out and so-in-so directors are making a movie starring so-in-so? We never talked about this?”

“I don’t think so,” I said, knowing full well we have not spoken about Trump except in punch-line passing. “I’m just one of those guys that plays armchair expert whenever an election comes up…” I kept to myself the discursive irony that we’re all Canadian and no one batted an eye, or voted, at the 2021 snap election that asserted a never-ending draconian Trudeau-led country.

Her other friend, who had a nasally-voice and long dyed jet-black hair, jumped in “so Andrea’s boyfriend isn’t one of these ‘woke’...”. She put up scare quotes, as if to signal that it was a reductive term rather than a pejorative. “...gen-z types?”

“Who’d you vote for?” said the valley girl one with a mischievous tone. I smirked, as if to remind her we were in Canada.

“Hold on, hold on, Andrea, why don’t you introduce me to your friends?”

“Oh, where are my manners?” she said sardonically. “This is Portia”; she gestured like Vanna White towards the nasally one. “And this is Kim”

“Nice to meet you two, I’m Jake” I did a polite half-bow thing instead of shaking hands or hugging because the tone of the conversation was fierce; not embrace material. I decided to just keep the fan of the political flame away from me. “I actually don’t have American citizenship, so I didn’t vote for anyone”

“I don’t mean that, silly!” said Kim. “Did you vote for Trudeau?”

“I’m not going to tell you who I voted for,” I said sternly. “It shouldn’t matter”

“Oh, come on, don’t be a pussy!” said Portia. “We’re just trying to get to know you!”. I noticed Pat had slipped off when they asked who I voted for. “PPC?”

The PPC - the People's Party of Canada - was Canada’s attempt at a Trump-y right-wing party that failed to gain any meaningful traction. Last election, they ran in trendy solidarity with the unvaccinated and without any meaningful policy relative to our pragmatic-albeit-destructive Conservatives. Our electoral system is unlike the American one, and I don’t fully understand it, but, roughly, each district elects a Member of Parliament that sits in the house of commons. The party with the most MP’s elects a prime minister equivalent to a president, but those single district MPs actually work in the capital and contribute to the federal government. We have five meaningful parties, with two dominant ones: The Liberals (the current), the Conservatives, the New Democratic Party (the progressive-working class party), the Green Party, and the Bloc-Quebecois (sort-of separatists, but looking out for Quebec as a uniquely governed province). The PPC only won a single seat in 2019, and, as it seems Portia misremembers, won no seats in the last election, although they were very loud for a few months. I misled you; I knew Trump was running again.

“The People’s Party of Canada?” I asked back, open-ended. She nodded, wide-eyed, eager for debate. “Well…” I looked at Andrea to see if she knew I voted NDP. She looked like she was having fun with the conversation, and was up for anything, so I continued. “Well… I thought every party had their issues”

“So you didn’t vote?” Kim paused and sized me up. Andrea seemed amused that her friend was getting riled up. “Did you get vaccinated?” asked Kim. I smiled.

“You must of…” said Andrea. “Did you not get vaccinated? Are you an anti-vaxxer?” I could see all my trollish bits and insensitive impressions flash before her eyes; questioning the sincerity behind my irony. Yet, I didn’t sense it was a deal-breaker either way. She could ride. I didn’t get vaxxed. Though, I didn’t attend any trucker rallies either. I decided to play cordial and see what happened. Usually, I just lied. Between Andrea and I, the subject of vaccination never came up that I recall. At the university vaccination status was, for a time, mandatory to work in the student union building, but it was all self-reported and free of fascist QR codes, so I just lied some more. No harm, no foul.

“I just didn’t like the idea of a government demanding I do something to my body I was uncomfortable with… like, I support the right to choose, for, you know, Abortion” I said it like a curse. I was around a mother, which seemed like the politically correct thing to do.

“Is it really the same?” said Andrea.

“I think so. I mean, abortion is way more important in a day-to-day, civil-liberties sense than the coronavirus, but my point stands”

“So you don’t care about immunocompromised people?” said Kim. Andrea and Patricia seemed amused but surprised by the length of immunocompromised - like she had found an excuse to say antidisestablishmentarianism. “You don’t care about your grandma?”

My grandma died shortly before our story took place. She was 94. The cause of death was pneumonia. I always wore a mask when I went to see her, although the mask was mandatory. Yet, because so many of the seniors were hooked on tribalist American news, the home she was in did not have vaccination mandate for visitors as it would be hypocritical given the swath of unjabbed geriatrics. I didn't really want to have this debate; I’d managed to get this far without it. I wanted to do coke.

“Listen, I just don’t want anyone, including Andrea, to think of me as some Alex Jones nutjob, but I also don’t want to be dishonest. I made a choice, and tried to be moral about it as best I can. I get some people hate me by default now, but it simply isn't this irrational microchip new world order thing that freaked me out. It was just an exercise of my free will, on my part, and I accept the consequences of it.”

“I’ve never met anyone who didn’t take the vaccine…” said Portia. “Were you not afraid of getting sick? There were so many stories… the Broadway guy at the beginning of the pandemic… he had holes in his lungs and was in a coma… and he died! His poor wife, I was glued to her videos… He was so young. That’s scary!”

“You know he has a talk show now? I dunno… something always rubbed me the wrong way about how that was broadcast to the world. I’m not denying what happened, but gaining clout and tiktoking it all really felt like bad faith to me” I said.

“She has a talk show?”

“Yeah, she joined *The Talk* less than a year after he died”

“That is kinda weird…” said Andrea. Good. Phew, she was unbothered.

“Do you guys have kids?” I said, hoping that someone wasn't going to explain mRna to me.

“We do. I have two little boys, and Kim’s got a daughter” said Portia. “They're a bit younger than Andrea’s… you’ve met him right?”

“Hardly, but yes… is he here?”

“He’s in the basement playing video games and terrorizing their kids, I imagine,” said Andrea.

“Hold on, Mister, you’re not slipping out of this with kid talk. I see through you… trying to get out of the hot seat…” said Kim, cheeky and less wrathful than before. I wanted to get out of this conversation and do coke with the guys upstairs.

“Ask me about something else! I said my piece!” I said, jokingly disgruntled.

“You voted PPC then,” said Andrea. “I don’t care, but you can just tell us…”

“Who’d you vote for?” I asked her, genuinely curious.

“Green” she said, as if it was obvious (it was obvious).

“I voted NDP” I acquiesced.

“Oh, you’re not all bad then!” said Portia. “Maybe a walking contradiction, but, fuck it, I guess the pandemics over. We’re having a party… I get it… anyways, Andrea didn’t tell us about you until tonight…”

“I know, I know, I’m pretty young”

“It's kinda hot that she’s dating a younger guy…” said Kim, doubling the valley-girl voice up. I was still running a bit hot from all the politics, relieved that we’d moved onto a more prescient taboo. Andrea kissed me on the cheek.

“My little unvaxxed stud!” she sipped her wine quickly, comically, like she knew I was a few lines of dialogue away from a full-blown argument; she cared more about decorum than the chemicals in my blood. “You know, if I was looking for another baby… you’ve got that virile unvaccinated sperm” she looked at me witch-like; diffusing the tension. When I reflect upon this moment later, it reminds me of *Zapped*, a Disney channel film starring Zendaya, filmed at my former high school, that a couple of my younger friends have featured extra roles in. In *Zapped*, Zendaya’s character is given

the ability to magically stop time with her smart-phone; while Andrea didn't stop time, it seemed Kim, followed by Andrea, stopped the worst-case-scenario conversation from occurring. Perhaps, maturity is preventing the most annoying socio-political arguments from happening while still drinking a ton. You learn to bury the hatchet before the war even begins. "Were you hanging out with my brother upstairs?" she pivoted.

"Yeah, yeah," I said, unsure what to add; wanting to gauge how she felt about our easy comradery. I wanted to do coke. "They have their own music playing…" was the least scrutinizing thing I could muster. "Pop Country" I said, countering "The Way We Get By", a spectacularly banal 'rock' song by otherwise good album-band Spoon. I wanted to find this guy again, and tell him to skip this one *now*. I'd settle for the twee-summer stylings of Belle and Sebastian over the single-camera sitcom credit song platitude of this.

"They hate the kids…" said Portia with a pregnant pause. "It just reminds them how little pussy they get".

"I used to date Kevin… you know. I think he's still scared of me"

"Really?" I asked, genuinely curious. I'm a bitch, at heart, too.

"Yeah, I mean, Patrick throws these parties pretty often, and he always goes upstairs, and gets fucked up with Brian and Kevin until the kids go home, then, finally, he comes downstairs, and he can barely speak to me. You know, I really don't care! I have a husband now. We dated for a bit. Grow up, man! But, really, I think all men are the jealous types, maybe its hard-wired. That possessive quality. We didn't date that long, though, like six months, and it was, like, almost twenty years ago". I tried to do the math, but it was beyond me. People tend to exaggerate time for effect regardless of age. "I guess our lives went different ways… but, lo-and-behold, we still gotta see each other at these Adamson parties"

"You guys still talk, whatever! Give Kevin a break!" said Andrea, lovingly. I wondered now what she thought of Sammy. "He's fucking *cooked* everytime he sees you".

"I don't know Andrea, I've *fucked* him, I can tell"

"Really, you can tell," added Kim.

"She fucked her brother" said Portia, pointing at Kim, to which Andrea rolled her eyes. "Just once, though"

“And… I’d do it again!” said Kim, cock-sure. I wondered where all the kids were… they were nowhere to be seen. Spoon had stopped, now it was… “His dick was *fucking hugeeeeeee*” she added to irritate Andrea.

“I’ve heard it all before” Andrea yawned in response. It was now just adults, and the energy had shifted. This was a party now. I gathered my senses; I smelled pot, pot being smoked inside. A faux-pas to some, and standard to a pacific northwest other. Were all the kids in the basement with Harrison? I wanted to go check, but I was embarrassed. I was hammered too; too hammered too. I wanted to smoke some of this pot… I wanted to do coke. I broached the subject, carefully.

“Is someone smoking weed inside?”

“Oh, yeah, it's eleven by now. It's probably Seamus” … Seamus! What a fucking Irish name. “You want some… you should meet him, you guys would get along” said Andrea before yelling towards the rest of the party. “Seamus! Get over here!”

“Where are the kids?” I asked, generally, before whoever this Irish fella was shantied over.

“They went home! Where else?” said Kim

“How’d they get home?” I asked.

“Pat’s wife takes the sprinter van and drives them home… no one’s too far” said Portia. “They don’t need babysitters! That’s old school. They're tired, she makes sure the doors are locked, it's fine. She’s a real mom’s mom, anyways, she hates the party”. This must be true, Pat didn’t ever try to introduce me to her. A complicated set-up, though, not self-evident like these strange, gregarious, crass ladies were implying. I wondered if Harrison was still here, but the implication was that he was not. How did they rally all these kids without me noticing? A Sprinter van? I imagine that looks like human trafficking. I guess it is human trafficking, in a way. I was the least horny I’d ever been surrounded by three funny older ladies I’d ever been in my life. I wanted to smoke some of Seamus’s weed. I wanted to do coke. I wanted to go to the bathroom and laugh at the eccentricity of the moment, but the moment would go away, instead of becoming normal. No ironic detachment, man, you’re in this. Let’s party.

There he was. Seamus had long hair too, and glasses. He looked like a second, poorer husband to a hot, free-spirited J.A.P, that did the trick in the sack and kept her intellectually stimulated too. I liked this guy from the get-go.

“Jake, this is Seamus!” said Portia, drunk, proud. “My husband”.

“Are you the one…” I didn’t want to sound like a kid, I dodged saying ‘aux’. “Playing the music?”

“Yeah, man, you like it?” he said, passing me his joint without asking if I ‘partook’. Just the smell of weed reminds me of my wasted youth; far-off bushes, pathetic older men selling us gutter weed, even more pathetic nights spent drooling over a bong while the worst of 90s hip-hop blared on like the empty philosophy of stoner ontology. I detest stoner culture now. It is a youthful phase where one can grow meaningful identity from – it opens you up to the arts and the natural world, but closes you off from pragmatism, productivity, and genuinity - for every bong-toting Micheal Phelps there are a million Rick and Morty xboxers. But, something about an older generation of pacific northwesterners, who now hold government jobs and complain to management about the service, in the midst of an industrious toke I found appealing. Seamus was more drunk than he was high. I hoped it was weak stuff that I could chuff like a cigarette. I inhaled once, to test the waters, and offered it to the girls who declined, and passed it back to the fellow longhair.

“Yeah, the playlist is great man,” I realized the banality of this statement… quickly, try to ask something meaningful… ‘Do you listen to NPR’ wasn't going to cut it’. I knocked back the rest of the beer in one gulp, and instead asked “You need another beer?” as a gesture of good faith. He nodded, pointing his fingers-gun at me, indicating ‘yes, sounds good’. I wanted to do cocaine and talk to him about the ‘Paul Simon’ effect; wherein white people are introduced to native-African styles of music through some of the strongest Americana lyricism there is to-date…"The Mississippi Delta / Was shining like a National guitar / I am following the river down the highway / Through the cradle of the Civil War”; a vivid tapestry of heartfelt Americana. Landmark bodies of water and nation-definition battles up-next to the king of rock and roll’s mansion; the eponymous Graceland. Yet, backdropping the American poetic poise is a fretless bass playing high up the neck mimicking the tone of earlier South African records along with assorted African percussion heard on any Zulu record before and since. I think of how ridiculously powerful Graceland is as an album, yet how tasteless it is in its cultural plagiarism compared to an equally African-laced group as the Talking Heads, who took the structural essence and ambitious over-orchestration of Kuti’s Afrobeat, and turned it into postmodern, border-line autistic music of its own. Where does that put Vampire Weekend? I’d like to do some cocaine, and talk about this exact subject with someone who knows their stuff. I found the fridge, without thinking about it, and grabbed four cans, and b-lined back to the circle. They had just enough time to tell Seamus I hadn't taken the vaccine.

“Man, I’d love to , like, ask you some questions about that…” said Seamus, putting on a mask of the unassuming stoner that I saw right through; assuming my ignorance through a false-agnosticism of his own. A modern move of socio-political discourse; I passed him a beer, and gave him the go-ahead.

“So, you're telling me it was about control?”

“Sure, sure, control. Control; yeah.”

“So, like, a libertarian?”

“You could say that, I guess. I don’t really fuck with some of the connotations the term comes with, but, I suppose I’m not comfortable with *how* mandatory it felt to take it” I wasn't having this conversation. I was thinking about World music and how it was introduced stateside. I wanted to pick someone older than me’s brain about it. “But, I don’t know, man, sometimes when I talk to people about it, I regret it”

“It’s not too late”

“Well, man, that would *really* be kowtowing to social pressure, wouldn't it? The social damage is done; I don’t think I can undo what I did. Maybe, honestly man, it was just easier to protest it all by *not doing* rather than *doing*; Whatever, I don’t know, I have a bit of a contrarian streak. It is what it is...”

“I get you, man, I mean, I got sick after getting vaccinated and it was still pretty bad” Seamus seemed to like my aloofness in my answer. The old ‘*whatever, man. What’d I know*?’ approach never fails to humble yourself in the court of public opinion.

“Anyways, I don’t really wanna talk about that” I said, waiting to see what he wanted to talk about.

“Yeah, I guess it's basically old news now…” he said, stroking his chin in thought. “So, how the fuck did you bag Andrea? That’s crazy, man” he said, moving closer towards stoned boogie-board enthusiast than stringent public radio aficionado. I answered him generically as I had throughout the evening, albeit avoiding the playful vulgarities I had exercised upstairs. I didn’t want to ask him about music anymore, nor did I want to listen to upbeat afrobeat-inspired classic rock. I just wanted the aux cord; I wanted to demolish this party with Nav and Gunna. I wanted, ultimately, to listen to slurs and do coke with the guys upstairs. We went back and forth, he told me about how he met his wife; it was a friend-of-a-friend and they met at a party and she thought he was funny and he thought she was hot and they got together and now there kids are being parroted

across state lines by a plus-size Ghislaine Maxwell while Jeffrey tends bar for his houseguests who desperately won't admit they want to fuck a bitch they picked right out of Vogue. I politely told Seamus we should join the ladies, and we moved back into their circle, now enshrining the kitchen island. They had a mischievous air about them, and, frankly, it stopped my cyclical disappointment that this Seamus guy was so milquetoast.

"Dad's gone upstairs…" said Andrea. "You know what they're doing up there…" Andrea said, testing my party-prouse and half-mocking Seamus for not being as masculine as her brother. Seamus seemed to not get the insinuation. I, never one to beat around the bush, smirked, and let it be known I wanted to get fucked up.

"Oh… so this is a *party* party now, huh…" Andrea gave me a stoked nod and a goofy, excited grin; charismatically tomboyish.

"You sure there's enough to go around?" Portia said, huddling the girls and I together, excluding her husband from the coke mission.

"Stewart and his buddies? All back together again… I bet your fucking Dad chipped in too…"

"There'll be enough," said Andrea knowingly, nearly clenching her jaw already. This, I could sense, was par for the Adamson course. They loved to get fucked up. She pivoted away from the kitchen island and grabbed two ice-cold bottles of Oyster Bay from the freezer and snapped towards Kim and Seamus. "You guys have a few more in your bag, no?". Seamus walked away without a word to fetch the new bottles. It was game time. I looked around, and the crowd had largely thinned. A few desperate forty-somethings were chatting on the couch, tired-looking, poking at their phones, apparently booking taxis home. It was for the grown-ups to get after it. Andrea, the gals, and I began to make our way up the stairs, before Andrea paused and addressed me. "The boys will want some more beer; I'm not sure what's left in the fridge, but Dad's got cases in the basement. Maybe grab a bottle of something too…"

I 180'd autopilot towards the basement, stoked, and whipped open the door, pudding down the stairs with the force of someone who lived there. I turned the corner and saw a medium-sized LG flat-screen quietly playing a 3D Sonic game I was unfamiliar with. I saw Harrison awkwardly positioned on the couch by himself, with a number of Diet Mountain Dews finished on the coffee table between him and the television. I forgot he was down here.

"What is this?" I asked him, honestly.

“It’s a video game, retard” he said without looking away from the glowing high-definition hedgehog.

“Fuck off, dude, I know that. Which Sonic is this?”

“What’d you care?”

“I’m a man of culture… I know my stuff…”

“Then you tell me what this is, faggot”. He said with enough voice crack for it to be funny instead of outright rude. I squinted, and assessed what I saw on the screen carefully, racking my brain for names of Sonic games from the last five-ish years. I vaguely remembered there being some remake that came out - one with these little willowy glowing anthropomorphic characters. I knew it wasn't the new one, *Frontiers*; that was on my radar. I shouted out an educated guess.

“It’s *Colors HD*…”

“What the fuck?” exclaimed Harrison in disbelief. Outdoing a precocious teen is a joy beyond description.

“Have you tried *Frontiers* yet?” I asked, sincerely. I had seen some gameplay and was fascinated by its open-world feel. However, I was unsure if it had actually come out yet. Harrison hesitated before responding.

“Not yet” he said, without the disdain in his voice carrying each of our interactions thus far. “Mom says I have to wait til’ Christmas”. This little brat did not want to admit that he relied on his mother for everything.

“Pause the game” I said, and grabbed the Switch controller from him. I had played a bit of *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* at Lee’s house, so I knew my way around the Switch okay. I hit the home button…and timidly navigated the menu without outright ruining his current *Sonic Colors* session and handed back the controller to Harrison. “Go to the Switch Shop” I said. He did so wordlessly. “Find *Sonic Frontiers*”. He searched it up… 80 dollars. I understood Andrea’s apprehension towards spending 80 Canadian dollars on a blue hedgehog game. But I pressed on, snatching the controller back from him. I saw you could use PayPal to buy it, so I linked my account to his quickly - my password is ‘ilovecum69’ so it was no struggle, and bought the game for him instantly. I quickly unlinked my PayPal account from the Switch store, and passed him the controller back. I shot up, and told him “You’re welcome”, before grabbing two fifteen cases and a Texas mickey of Canadian Club without looking at the kid again.

18

As I approached Stewart's door, I listened to the humdrum of some song about an F1-50 while parsing out and identifying the muted Two Door Cinema Club coming from downstairs. They had all had their fill while I was in the basement; two wormy white-lines were cut-up on to Stewie's little glass table for me, with a hundred dollar bill perfectly rolled up at my disposal, and a generous vial of powder out in the open. I set down the excess of booze beside the coke table and grabbed a new beer for myself and handed out drinks to everyone in the room. "Can we change the music?" I asked candidly. "War Pigs. Black Sabbath". Stewie and his pals quickly obliged, playing it loud and clear, drowning out whatever twee nonsense Seamus had on downstairs. I grabbed the bill, letting the massive tone of Tommy Iami wash over me. I snorted two lines, one per nostril, gracefully, without the hyperbolic chortle you see Al Pacino do in the movies; you gotta coat the nostril so the veins - otherwise called capillaries - take in all the good stuff, as to not have it wastefully drip back through the sinus. I felt the rush in an instant. Good, clean stuff. I felt anxious too, in an overt, titillating way only good drugs make you feel. We had to get the vibe right. As Ozzy began to sing. I shook my head, trying to shake it off, and asked them to change the music again. Graceland. "Play Graceland, Paul Simon, instead".

This night will contain dancing, and I'll end up sleeping in a doorway. The come-up of cocaine is quick but subtle. You don't quite notice the stimulation take effect, you just start babbling, and, cocktailed with booze and Adderall, it wasn't much of a change. Just an ego shift. They were talking about how I was unvaccinated, to which Kevin had revealed that he was too. The coke was good… I could feel my gums numbed out, and my teeth felt suspiciously clean. I wanted to smoke more dope too.

"Listen, man, fucking Bill Gates said it himself, like years before covid…

"I mean, I saw the same clip, yeah." I said. "In fact, I have the audiobook of Robert F. Kennedy's *The Real Anthony Fauci* on my phone; I listened to about half of it, and found it largely hard to contest, but with a stat-citing delusionality that I couldn't bring myself to buy into. Some of these conspiracies - the human race as guinea pig for mRna, overpopulation control, and some evil dystopian desire to control mankind in favor of the wealthy few - were compelling because they justified my decision, but the schizo-affected air and smug partisan tone in which they were decimated made it impossible for me to entertain. I'm not a freedom fighter - really, I just hate being told what to do". As I auctioneered my way through 'smug partisan' I realized I was speaking aloud. "Like, I wouldn't want a guy like Chris Sky around my girlfriend… he's got this Guido

rapist energy and grifter steez that no serious political movement should accept as one of their own; RFK is the only reasonable one, and that's not saying much at all".

"You loosen up a bit after a little coke, huh?" said Stewie. "Holy fuck, motor mouth over here… anyone know who RFK is?" he addressed to the room, to a series of shrugs.

"The other dead Kennedy?" said Andrea's dad. I hadn't even noticed that we were doing blow in front of her father.

"Brian would've fuckin' loved this guy…" Pat said, innocuous.

"You guys probably would've gotten along…" Andrea admitted. "But Jake's no Brian… he's sensitive…" she said. "Plus…" she gestured with her eyes towards my crotch, to which Pat chuckled.

> And I see losing love
> Is like a window in your heart
> Well, everybody sees you're blown apart
> Everybody feels the wind blow

What a hot room. I haven't drunk water at all today. How yellow was my piss earlier? Wait…"who's Brian?". I thought of Brian Wilson, fat, depressed, in bed, humming old children's songs to himself. *Pet Sounds* wouldn't really hit right now.

"My ex," said Andrea. Oh yeah.

"Right, sorry"

"You talked to him lately?" asked Stewie, mysteriously.

"No more than normal" she replied coy yet firm. I hit my vape hard. It felt good, like a CPAP machine that causes sleep apneia; like minty water. I bet Pat would let me smoke a cig inside.

"Well, you must've though…" he said, as if he was verbally sneaking through a bush on a guerilla mission to assassinate his sister in the Congo. "Right?"

"What're you talking about?" said Portia, affected and strange.

"You know what I'm talking about, Portia!" said Stewie. "Its all we've been talking about all night! I'm not gonna walk on fuckin' eggshells around Jake"

“This is awkward,” added Kim, like she was Jim in the Office. I started to feel something in my gut - a familiar nervousness. An impure state. The way we look to a distant constellation that's dying in a corner of the sky. Don't cry baby, don't cry, don't cry. Revelations to come. At home in my bed, texting and waiting, far superior. Nowhere to hide. Songs are better than parties. Songs at parties are better than songs at home. I’d do another line. I reached across the table and told them aloud to wait.

“Wait” I reached in my pockets, retrieving my littlest of keys - the one for my projection booth - and stuck it carefully into the vial twice-over - once per nostril. I set it back down on the table with a huff and puff, and told them “continue”.

“Alright.. Well, I didn’t wanna do this now, but my brothers made it unavoidable… Brian’s gotten into some trouble…”

“What kind of trouble?” I asked.

“Brian’s always got these fuckin’ schemes going man, I dunno…” said Sammy.

“No, man, it's not like that, he just…”

“Let me tell the story, you retards,” said Kevin. “Jake knows all this shit, clearly, so let me tell him in a language he understands”.

What Kevin told us was roughly this: Brian was an early ‘online’ guy - shareware, BBS, and the likes, but graduated to 4chan /biz/, Manoverse Twitter, r/WallStreetBets online – as a result of his friendship with Stewie. Stewie had the get rich-quick-bug: a reader of Carnegie first (How to Win Friends & Influence People), which brought him some social capital at the BMO he once worked for, then some light Kiyosaki & Lecher (Rich Dad Poor Dad), shortly thereafter the mid-00’s advent of image boards and YouTube introduced to him esoteric allocation of money vis-a-vis silver, plutonium, and the likes, then he managed to illegally procure of a Bloomberg terminal through pre-VPN IP falsification and an obsessive learning of Mandarin because of his falsified Hong Kong IP address, along with avid watching of Jim Cramer (Mad Money) in tandem with raucous forum dwelling, and, in conclusion, an early adopter of CryptoCurrency. Why wasn't Stewie contently rich? Well, I suggest looking up the most vulgar report on Hunter Biden’s day-to-day life for an example. Brian was a cheater, and an addict all the way, and it got nastier when he got to Hong Kong. Brian and Stewie stayed friendly as their athleticism dissipated in typical late-twenties-drinking fashion and moved to Steam-sale exploratory gaming as their form of friendship. I was surprised to learn that they gravitated towards goofy job sims and porn games like ‘Kinky Fight Club’ rather than Battlefield or Call of Duty.

“Kinky Fight Club?” I asked.

“Stewie… this one’s on you pal..” said Kevin.

“Bro, it's so funny, man, don’t get the wrong idea… its like, N64 graphics, and you try and make the other person cum instead of fighting”. I picked up my phone and texted ‘look up Kinky Fight Club’ to myself.

“I get the idea…” I said, smirking. “Kind of weird, though, for you and your buddy to play these together, no?”

“Kevin played it too”

“Shut up, dude!” said Kevin.

“He’s the one that finds all these retarded Steam games for us to play…” added Stewie.

“Whatever, that's beside the point…” he digressed.

A few months ago, Brian told Stewie about ‘alt-coins’ - CryptoCurrencies other than BitCoin and Ethereum.

Andrea interrupted Kevin: “I didn’t... you started…” she said, agasp at Stewie’s involvement, and reached for the vial of coke.

Brian got the bright idea to start his own alt-coin - called ‘Kok Coin’ - cock coin. He tried to convince Sammy, Kevin, and Stewie to get in on it, but none of them bit. It was just too farcical; it felt too late, and Kevin, in particular, talked sense into everyone about the volatility of the crypto market (so he claims).

“You’re speaking fucking gibberish” said Pat, who had taken the vial from his daughter. “But, go on, I wanna know how this ends…” he said, as he chuffed back some coke.

So, headstrong, Brian starts Cock Coin - KokCoin. KokCoin got a little traction on Twitter. People invest, or, so they think. Brian had hired someone on Fiverr to create a fake crypto exchange - one in which KokCoin was exclusively listed - and people were able to put in *real* crypto and cash to purchase KokCoin - and a few other listed coins - on the app. But really, they were putting cash in Brian’s own Crypto wallet. It lasted nine days and accumulated roughly 110,000 USD worth of various currencies before he was put on blast on Twitter, and, shortly thereafter, was arrested in Hong Kong for fraud. He is currently awaiting trial. I realized I had read about the KokCoin scandal

passively. I was shocked but saw little of what this had to do with me - other than making me look so much better than him in Andrea's eyes.

"So… do you remember 9/11?" asked Sammy, roughish and random.

"I do," I said, wondering if 9/11 had anything to do with Brian.

"Andrea went fucking crazy during 9/11…" Sammy had gotten a hold of the vial, and took a snort before continuing. "We used to have this buddy… Omar… we'd play soccer with him and shit…"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" raged Andrea.

"How old were you on 9/11?"

"I was six" I said - they ended school early and sent us home. I remember all the TV channels were George Bush Jr. addressing the nation. I didn't understand what had happened until the next day when my fifth-grade neighbor said a bunch of brown people blew up a tower in New York.

"Holy fuck, man, what were we?" asked Sammy to the room. "I was ready to go to war, man" he said, humdrum that he didn't serve.

"We were sixteen-ish," said Kevin. "Anyways, let's not talk about the fucking Omar thing - that's Sammy's favorite anecdote - but, whatever, we'll get back to that…" Kevin grabbed the coke from Sammy and snorted some himself. "...that's not *exactly* the end of the story"

Andrea interjected, mad as a bat out of hell: "The end of the story is Brian's fuck-ups mean I have to go to Hong Kong in January. That's what it means! Fuck you guys, honestly. I was trying to have a nice night, get fucked up and have a good time with Jake, and you go and fuck it all up"

I didn't have any time to process this - it was like a podcast. Kevin tried to balance things out while Sammy hung about slack-jawed, Kim and Portia looked knowingly uncomfortable, Pat snorted more coke, and Stewie looked pleased with himself. Kevin piped up: "I'm sorry, Andrea. I didn't realize… I didn't think about the bigger picture…"

Andrea, mad with tears, but holding it together with maternal will, responded "it's okay, Kevin, really. It's complicated. Brian's got a lot of stuff in Hong Kong, and if he's going

to be going away for a long time, I need to be there with Harrison to sort it out. I don't really want to go into details, but there's a lot of, uh, money on the line"

I spoke up "I don't understand"

"I don't really either…" said Andrea, certainly only half-true. "Its for Harrison in the long-run. We have to tie up loose ends over there for Brian. It's bullshit, I know, but there's a better life for all of us at the end of this"

A deal with the devil. Us. With ambition aimed, quiet still, he usurped the ivory grains, and huffed, and sipped. Is this the Region, this the Soil, the Climate, this the seat that we must change for Heaven. This mournful gloom for that celestial light? Not homeless; Zio yami, zio yami, nhliziyo yami Nhliziyo yami amakhaza asengi bulele. Coke. Harry's son. I know. I know. I hope it fleets.

"Well…" I said, putting the coke back down. "A lot to think about". Numb.

"Okay, so you guys wanna hear about Omar…" added Sammy. Seamus came up the stairs. Such a light step - dainty, thoughtful, practiced.

"Everybody's gone…" he said, and presented another vial, this one liquidy. "We ready?" he added before dropping a dose of acid on his tongue. In da gadda da vida. He reminded me of Oliver Stone's *The Doors*. I felt like I might die tonight. Or, end up sleeping in a doorway. I had taken acid a few times, most notably at a Flaming Lips concert which was one of the most sublime experiences of my entire life. I looked at Pat, funny ol' Patrick.

"Can I smoke inside?" I asked him.

"Well, fuck, what's the harm?" he said, before slapping around Stewie as if to ask for a cigarette. "Decency's out the window tonight, huh Stew?" he slurred as he gripped his son's pockets for a pack. "Who's got a lighter?" he said, which Seamus quickly handed over. Pat passed the pack around the circle. "Why don't we take this down-stairs, huh? If all those *squares* are gone… lets get fucked up" he said like a late-career Jack Nicholson. As we shuffled out of Stewart's stuffy little room, Seamus nodded at me while presenting the acid vial. I turned to Andrea, with a look asking 'are *we* in?' to which her bleary-eyed obdurate front said 'absolutely'.

I held out my tongue and let out a muffled "you do it". Seamus let a little drip fall on my palette.

“I laced it with Moderna” he said; he slapped my back like he’d only seen sports on TV. The worst joke I ever laughed at.

“Did you ever see Ariana Grande and Megan thee Stallions on Jimmy Fallon? I think it got sort of memory-holed but it was the most vial, corporate, cloying shit I’ve ever seen in my life. It was this parody song called a “Masked Christmas” where they tell you should get a booster and Zoom with your parents instead of celebrating normally. man , like, I don’t know. That shit got me fired up”

“Nah, I never saw it” Seamus was not coked up. “Sounds weird, though, for sure…” Pat grabbed my ass, mumbled that it was like a girls but not like his daughters. We got situated in the living room. We left Paul Simon upstairs. Right now, Seamus had Tokyo Police Club playing - one of the very few crossover indie rock successes in Victoria, but not a truly notable band outside of here - you know what… maybe there from somewhere else. They're inoffensive. They have a song where they say the name of the band and I always found them pretty charming.

“Seamus! Where's Tokyo Police Club from?” I asked. He paused, unsure.

“I thought they were from here?”

“So did I, but I’m thinking about it more, and I’m not sure that's true”

He tapped at his phone quickly, and answered “Newmarket, Ontario… well, fuck. I always thought they were local…”

“Me too… maybe they just got a lot of play here”. We have a pretty milquetoast alternative rock station called The Zone that plays post-punky stuff, but only the most radio friendly of it; like Tokyo Police Club, or early Interpol. I sat on the couch next to Andrea. She whispered to me; she smelled so much like wine and I liked it because I smelled so much like beer.

“Are you mad at me…??” She said, girlish, meek, and defeated.

I whispered back, in the sultry tones of a coked-up twenty-something. “Not at all, mama… you got your life; it's not my goal to make it any worse. Besides, what I heard really had nothing to do with you, although you're paying the consequences, I guess… I dunno. All I can say is that I love you, warts and all” she lit up, and kissed me hard. “Let's not let your dumbass brother ruin this special night” I added cheekily.

“Thanks, Jake. I love you too” she whispered before reorienting herself to the social setting at hand. We’d never said that before… but it was so natural, it felt microcosmic,

like it had been saidunsaid months ago but it made me feel cheerful amidst the insufficient playlist and victim-complexation re:my vaccination status. Let's get to know her friends better…

“Portia!” I yelled across the room. She was sitting with Kevin but not talking to him; he and Sammy were chatting across the room. “What’d you do?”

“What doesn't she do!?” chuckled Pat.

“I have a few things on the go… I have my real estate license, but the markets have been pretty shitty recently… mostly, these days, I just work in my shop” she said, rehearsed, but not rehearsed well enough.

“Oh, it's so fucking obvious, Portia!” Kim interjected, simultaneously grabbing the joint Seamus had quietly lit up after proving my hypothesis on Tokyo Police Club. Pat continued laughing and offered me a beer - keen eye this guy has, I had just finished mine. An old, affable alcoholic such as himself must have an ear for the hollow thud of an empty beer can on a coffee table. “She has a rich husband… in Dubai…”

“Part time, in Dubai…” she added. “His work is in Dubai”

“How’d you swing that?” I asked.

“It was, uh, online after me and my ex-husband split…”

“So is your ex-husband your baby daddy then?”

“Yeah. But, Hamdan, he’s not interested in kids…” said Portia.

“What’s Hamdan do??”

“Business… well, fuck, what do I know!!? He’s rich as hell, all that matters!” hollered Portia, raising a glass in celebration of her sugar baby lifestyle.

“Does he ever come around these things?” I said, gesturing to the room, to say ‘is he friendly with everyone here’.

“Fuck no, no way” said Kim. “I’m the only one that’s met him”

“And…?” I asked with genuine curiosity.

“He’s just some really really skinny Arab guy with an expensive suit and sunglasses… he was quiet, serious, formal, and well-mannered”

“You know I like a well-mannered man, Kimmy…” said Portia, flirtatiously, while tickling Kevin’s stomach. He looked uncomfortable with the conversation but starved for the touch Portia had just provided him.

“What do you guys talk about?” Kevin said, putting my thoughts into the barest of questions.

“To be honest, he just gives me stuff and tells me I’m beautiful; that's the jist of it. At this point in my life, that's what I need”. Portia cut up a line…

Stewie was quiet. He hadn't touched the coke. Pat hadn't thrown him a beer - because his beer was incomplete. He seemed downtrodden, despairing. I muttered to Andrea “your brother looks fucking beat”

“He’s just fucked up” she said back.

“I think he feels bad for spilling the beans”

“No way; he’d never…” she said, knowing this was untrue. She had that Adamson geniality, and so did Stewie. Ignoring herself, she leaned over and flapped her hands between his legs. “Stewie!! It's okay, bud… cheer up!”

“What? Huh…” he said, pretending he was just waking up. “Sorry, sis, I just zoned out”

“Drink up, pal” I said, passing him over one of the bottles of hard bar that had been lying unsipped for too long.

“Alright, alright, I’ll pep up…”

Sharia law, Airplane tickets, Cocaine, Pat passed out, Daycare, Autism diagnosis, gold diggers, Ashley Madison, weed being legal, justin trudeau, donald trump, hate crimes, apoplexy, you and i are not so different pal, im sorry no i never told you about this its hard to talk about get me another drink pass me the lighter we’re almost out of blow holy gonna have nose bleed at this rate my husband my son my blah blah blah blah blah… i just wanna babble about the music… none of these people like kanye… the never heard of future… they smoke inside…more stairways… too much… way too much man… too much… talking to a kid… even if he called me slurs… this kid’s alright… reminds me of the old internet… i tell him about forums, he says something sarcastic, i ask him if i can play… he says no… i ask if he has adventure 2… he says it's not on the switch you retard… i say anything two player… im sick of these people upstairs honestly… i offer him a beer he says ya sure, he sips it, doesn't pretend to like it but doesn’t say otherwise… i notice he does not finish the beer… he puts on some

two player game we play together for not very long he wins… i havnt grown up as fast i thought i would… are you good at smash… i played some last summer when i was drunk and i was pretty good… he says hes okay but hed rather play something else… dragon ball 3d kekkaihi… i play some of that… i did this when iwas kid… dragon ball's so cool what a story huh… yeah i like it too… whos your favorite character… i like vegata… ya vegetas badass he gets the bluehair girl that rules… ya who do you like… i always like the android girl with kirllian thought it was pretty funny torimamas ideas of romance were funny did you read the sonic comics i liked them when i was kid; put the game i bought on i wanna see what a open sonic world is like… okay sure i read them on my computer ya… i think i have some in my basement somewhere old ones i wonder if they still make em… they do but its not the same… it never is lets see this shit man… thanks… i crack another… and i fade… i hope it dosen't fleet… i wake up thirsty gotta pee theres a big sink down here that kids asleep too good he won't see my willy haha… peeings awesome… boy, im tired back to bed… the kid stretched out on the whole couch he's kind of a big guy for his age damn i guess the floors fine im in the doorway now…

I wake up, dead alive. Andrea's next to me. She's pale like an elephant tusk. As cocaine.

"Are you mad at me?"

"I was going to ask you the same question"

19

Pat's made us breakfast. "I didn't expect such a late night, holy crap…" he said, watching the bacon crackle. Each pop of pork fight rang out like a memory of war. I was not hungry, but I should eat. I helped myself to some water from the tap. Pat was drinking a beer. I looked at it with horror.

"Hair of the dog, pal, you want one?"

"Not a chance man…"

"Suit yourself" he sipped on.

I felt a cosmic shame, but so did everyone. Andrea, Stewie, even Harrison reeked of self-pity and disgust. Andrea and I had a difficult conversation ahead of us; and only its essence I could recall. Hong Kong. Blockchain. Fraud. Going away. Omar. She was going for a while, but she wanted me to wait for her. Okay. That's not so bad. I wonder

how long it's gonna be. I thought more so about the present. I needed some time alone; I needed to tell someone my age about this evening.

“Do you have any Clamato?” I asked Pat like I was asking a nurse for morphine.

“Sure do, champ” he quickly grabbed it from the fridge. “You gotta make your own though; I know how particular people get with these Caesars, man”. I took it from him, and snagged a beer from the fridge, stomaching the first three gulps before pouring a few ounces of Caesar mix into the tab.

“Michelada anyone?” I asked.

“Is that any good?” Pat asked me.

“It does the trick, sure” I said, affecting my Canadian accent to mask the vastness of the abyss.

“Pour some in here,” he said. I obliged.

He pondered… “not bad, not bad.”

Before no time had passed, Stewie, Andrea, Pat, and I were all drinking again. I wondered where Pat’s wife was, but I didn’t want to ask. Harrison was quiet, playing his Switch handheld.

“What are you playing now?” I asked

“Pokémon” he replied, aloof.

“You like Pokémon?” asked Andrea, half-hearted but curious. I loved Pokémon. The first time I ever felt sad was realizing Ash Ketchum wasn't real, and if he was, he lived in Japan, and that that was very far away. “I think it's weird… honestly, I find the whole Japanimation thing weird”

“It's very popular now…” I paused, not wishing to elaborate much in the fog of last night. “I think it's cool”.

“He loves it,” Andrea added, pointing to her blue-light blinded son.

“I don’t *love it* mom…” he said painfully tweenish. “But, yeah, Pokémon's sweet”

She whispered in my ear “I caught him looking at big cartoon boobs once… he’s just embarrassed”. I smiled in solidarity with the poor boy.

“Which Pokémon are you playing?”

“You play as the trainer, dumbass”

“I know, man, I know about fucking Pokémon. Which version?”

“I’m playing *Pokémon Unite*”

“Oh yeah, I played that on my phone for a bit with my buddy”

“It's honestly pretty good… a Pokémon MOBA is a gay as fuck idea but, like, everyone on here is Chinese and five so I just dominate… which is pretty fun”

“Sweet” I said passive, dismissive. He sounded like Lee, and it made me uneasy to recognize that my friend talked like an edgy kid. I thought to ask if there was cross-play, but it fell into the black hole of shame I was soaking in.

Breakfast was quiet; Stewart was quieter. Andrea tried to pep him up, but clearly, he felt he had interfered in our relationship. After eating and drinking enough to get home, the three of us left; Andrea driving. I had never been in the car with her before… I didn’t know she had a car. She asked me to play music… I said okay and put on Paul Simon; it made me anxious, so I turned it down to a department store volume. The kid couldn’t stop gaming; good god. He just pecked away at his little game in the back. The car ride was quiet, too. Andrea seemed nonplused, but not at me. Nonplused with herself, maybe. I needed alone time. I needed to be free for a moment. But we had to make arrangements when the kid wasn't in earshot. We got to her apartment and told Harrison to wait in the lobby. The adults had to talk.

“Thanks for the game.” He said to me, finally acting his age, as he exited the vehicle.

“So…” she said with nervousness.

“So… you tell me, Andrea. I’m up for it”

“Up for what?”

“Whatever you need”

“Will you wait for me?”

“I will”

We hugged, we kissed, and she offered me a ride home. I told her to be with her son; he's probably having a hard time anticipating the future and no one can quell that quite like your mom can. She said okay, Jake, I love you. I love you too. She double-checked, are you okay, walking? Are you sure? I said yes, I have a lot to think about. And she understood and let me on my way. I stepped out of the car, happy I had remembered to charge my phone the night before. I had a long way to go. A long way to go. A long way to go. I took it slow. I stopped for coffee at Starbucks, got a funny drink - strawberry maccha iced drink. It was very sweet. Too sweet. I didn't eat the frozen candied strawberries because they became red mush by the time I finished the latte part. I stopped at a gas station; got one of those big smart waters jennifer aniston used to advertise. I listened to podcasts; comfy ones; comfy parasocial ones. matt and shane and cumtown and yeah but still and red scare which i found to be too nasty and bad faith for me today so i switched it off and thought about the names of podcasts i used to listen to before i fell into this landfill of alt-bro comedy that i loved so much. i know i did listen to podcasts, but which ones i can't recall. a lot of video game ones when i was much younger, thats for sure. I wondered if apple had the data. i used their app the most. i stopped at a hipster burger place; smash burgers, easy to eat. they had a beer special so i had three. they passed the time. the burger was so good it could've made me cry if it was a crying day. i stopped at a used video game store and looked around. lots of sonic stuff, mostly dolls slash plushies. thought about buying a genesis, but wasn't sure if my tv had those red yellow white chords in the back - actually, it for sure did, but it would probably look like shit. the prices were egregious so i left. i stopped at a grocery store, got some of those wafer cookies the strawberry ones and some salt and vinegar chips and a gatorade. i finally got home after walking along the beach with my snacks in a reusable sack i bought at the store. they had banned plastic bags in the region i lived, but not the region of the liquor store i used to work at. I thought about how silly little rules are when i bought the reusable bag for two dollars. I got home and lied in my bed for a while. I was so tired but not sleepy. I put on family guy because of brian and stewie. I didn't laugh at all. I found a video on youtube on my phone called Sonic 2 Bonus Video and i was completely locked in. i felt i had watched this before in some distant hungover past. but it resonated today. It resonated today. It resonated.

20

The holiday season is not a generative time; plans are made to do so-and-so creative things, accomplish X-Y-Z social activity, but really, I just stumble around drunk and exhausted. The body gives out with no obligations. I had some nice evenings with my parents, and with Andrea and Harrison, who had graduated from Santa Claus and Christmas jubilee a couple of years ago. It didn't help that the shadow of his felon-to-be

father was looming over us. I watched the *Silent Night Deadly Night* franchise which was only schlocky because it recycled footage from the first one ad nauseum but otherwise proved to be artful and novel. Andrea was set to leave on the 30th, and was largely busy with family obligations, VISA what-have-you, and setting Harrison up to continue school in China through distance learning intermixed with homeschooling. Her life was uprooted - picking up the pieces of someone else's mistake. I did what I could to help - bringing food, offering levity, and consoling, but she was too grown and focused on her boy to take pause for panic, as she should be. Our goodbye was pragmatic, overshadowed by convoluted promises of her return and means of communication against the lofty time difference; no tears. Just goodbye. I waved them off as they entered the security at the airport, almost as if I was witnessing Tom Hanks or Billy Crystal do so in third-person and bussed my way back into town. I felt relief; unrewarding relief. Like I was back to square one. Like I was single again, but not really. She texted me after forty minutes an "I Love You" [case-sensitive, as written]. I thought about the book *Norwegian Wood*; when Watanabe hazily falls into a foggy depression after hearing that his BPD milf has taken her life. I felt like Murakami must've exaggerated some version of what's happening to me now. Tomorrow, however, was New Years Eve, and I was going to get fucked up beyond all reason and have a good time with my pals.

21

I awoke on New Year's Day hungover as all hell; nothing new. I had done coke with a vegan; too much coke. I spent the day in bed, lonely, depressed, hungry. I *Uber* ate. I opened up Netflix in the late afternoon, and saw that *Sonic Prime* had been released, so I gave it a go. It was a quick watch - I appreciated its vie for serialized storytelling and unconventional approach to the Tails character. I decided I'd give up drinking, at least for a while, and chill out on the rampant cinephilia and get to know video games a bit better; get to know Sonic better, specifically. For now, I took notes on *Prime*, and decided, why not? I'd do some *Sonic* writing and research, as a way to keep up with Harrison, and see what came of it.

22

The taste buds of western hobbyists have been irreparably damaged by the nerd gaze: the reward of recognition; blinded by the computer-generated shimmer of nostalgic familiarity. Multi-film continuity, as a means of delivering audiences pleasure, is the

crude oil of the blockbuster environment: it works well as a source of energy, but it's finite, deeply destructive, and of diminishing returns.

Laura Mulvey coined the now-platitudinous term the "male gaze" in her influential article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". Her belief that film constructs women as an empty sign of male desire is the essence of the male gaze. Scopophilia, a ten-dollar word no doubt, is a Freudian concept borrowed by Mulvey to explain the "pleasure in being looked at" (59). Much of Freud and Mulvey's work centers on a binary of gender and of heterosexuality, but in the case of the scopophilia in nerd culture, I resign from focalizing pathology, eroticism, and primality even if the nerd and nerd-adjacent media is rooted in constructing masculine exceptionalism. The blatant S&M connotations of superhero uniforms, for example, is a subject one could dissect with ease, but my focus is on a specifically contemporary type of pleasure, one related to non-sexual voyeurism: recognition, continuity, nostalgia, and media-driven identity.

A YouTube video entitled "Cinema Audience Ration to Captain America Holding Thor's Hammer" features a crowd frenzied by the nerd gaze. Not only are they rewarded by Captain America's god-like worthiness of lifting the Mjölnir, but it is also followed by an onslaught of returning characters all assembled in the fashion of a two-page comic book spread. The response of the audience is not an intellectual one, nor is it really emotional, but a compulsive celebration of recognition. This climactic scene in *Endgame*, with its back-to-back moments of epicsaucian fan-service, is the epitome of the nerd gaze – a barrage of symbols from prior franchise entries on display for maximum visual pleasure. Attempts at capturing the fervor of the nerd gaze have been made to little-to-no success by studios outside the MCU since *Iron Man* such as the Sony Spider-Man Universe, the Dark Universe, and the Detective Comics Extended Universe.

The nerd gaze, at its most sinister and capitalistic, relies on two different presumptions about the audience from the parent company. The first is what we saw at the end of the first *Iron Man*. The audience, at least in part, has a baseline understanding of the source material, and thus they understand that Tony Stark is in fact not "the only superhero in the world. [...] [he's] become a part of a bigger universe", as Nick Fury extols. More recently, the Sonic the Hedgehog films have included stingers introducing favorite characters from the games to the film's lore. Tails appears mid-credits in the first film; Shadow in the second. The second presumption expects the audience to have paid enough attention or enjoyed the film enough to notice an untied loose-end, perhaps a scene that does not fit in the body of the film that can be tacked on as a means of providing greater context, as is the case with *Napoleon Dynamite's* post-credit wedding scene. The comedy's stinger functions as an additional punchline and an

acknowledgment of an incomplete narrative, but in a nerd friendly franchise this second presumption operates as an insular narrative hail-mary; most frequently the revelation that the antagonist has survived their ambiguous demise, as seen in *Uncharted* and *The Playmobil Movie*.

If the male gaze implies that cinema includes women only as vessels of male desire that construct and reduce women to mere objects then the nerd gaze pimples that shared-universe-cinema reduces narrative to a series of pre-established actors-as-specific-characters, macguffins, items, locations, and dialogue meant to induce pleasure through recognition. The Marvel Cinematic Universe has a massive advantage compared to non-superheroic franchises by having a gargantuan archive of popular source materials that does much of the heavy lifting by preestablishing the significance of visual symbols.

The nerd gaze is nothing new to the Otaku.

The early comic book lore-ologists of Marvel and DC deserve their flowers, but the Otaku understands the rich capitalism of anime and video game fascination apropos oodles of multimedia content that trumps the contemporaneous *Secret Wars* readers. I will sheepishly avoid speaking on behalf of Japanese fandom, thus deflecting Gaijin.accusations, but I will pontificate on the western nerd brigade. The film *Otaku no Video* perfectly surmises the consumptive pathology of the fervorous fan by charting the remarkable transformation from an ordinary college student to an unabashed Otaku. A franchise, for some, is an ever-moving macrocosm that expands and adapts in mirror of the expanding and adapting audience and creators alike. A certain breed of intellectually curious, sexually stunted, outsider types find their franchise; their "dinosaur" as put by Richard Jenkins in the ingenious 2008 comedy *Step Brother* or "Cutie Mark" in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, and developed their identity around it. As a rule of thumb, the animalistic need to wear a media franchise as a proud chemise accomplishes only a fraction of the "dinosaur" – the "dinosaur", in Otakuist fandom, is colossal. The complex labyrinth of the western comic book universe come-MCU-fan is elementary in comparison to its Japanese counterpart. The otaku understands that toys become manga that become an anime that produce recap movies that produce prequel & sequel OVAs that by design are meant to spread exponentially into manic hobbyist accumulation like the *Otaku no Video's* interview subjects. This is not a 20th century invention by any means. In order to understand Milton's *Paradise Lost* one must grapple with the Genesis story which in turn borrows from Greek creation myths originating in the ancient works of Homer, Ovid, and the likes. The video game franchise, however, creates an impenetrable self-defined relationship through the interactive essence of the medium. While I agree, in part, with some of the ludological game theorists, exemplified by Jesper Juul in much of his work, I believe that looking at

multi-entry series, spawning from game and reaching beyond, most notable in the mascot platformer, makes for a riveting dissection of video game narratology en-masse, and, perhaps, cause for the radical acuumlation of the Otaku.

The great emblematic video game characters of the 90s, Mario and Sonic the Hedgehog, share an invaluable commonality in their first entries: a lack of formal narrative and their strong sense of character. Other mediums rich in character-driven content are inherently story-driven, as with literature, film and television. We collectively understand Spider-Man and Batman are motivated by the death of their parental figures. Yet Sonic's motivation is unclear. However, video games operate as pieces of fiction by virtue of being a simulation, even if they lack story or narrative altogether. Mario, in his original NES form, is barebones story-wise – Mario runs from castle-to-castle hoping to save the princess from the evil dragon-turtle, Bowser. Sonic, in his original SEGA Genesis form, ran from place-to-place trying to save capsule-enclosed animals from a robot-obsessed satire of a soviet, Doctor Robotnik. The undercurrent and all-powerful Chaos Emeralds, understood in later entries to be the essential MacGuffin behind the Sonic universe, can be completely ignored by the player when completing the game. As far as I can tell, what is understood about 1991 *Sonic the Hedgehog*'s narrative, story, and lore has been derived from paratext and transmedia, most obviously the game's manual and references in later games and exterior media respectively. Jesper Juul's essay on the relationship between game and narrative suggests that paratext provides a prehistory for the player's conception of the game's narrative, particularly in earlier arcade-style titles like *Space Invader*.

> "Most games have a story written on the package, in the manual, or in intro-sequences, placing the player's playing in the context of a larger story (back-story), and/or creating an ideal story that the player has to realize. The player's playing in the context of a larger story (back-story), and/or creating an ideal story that the player has to realize" (Juul)

Paratext in early video games is limitless. Is a piece of lore stemming from a prototype canon? Is a pre-release commercial with some background information paratext? Fans proceed to take the abundance of paratextual elements in video games, combined with a little imagination and creativity, and piece together what is colloquially referred to as "headcanon". Headcanon is the act of a fandom using the source material to come to their own conclusion about the source-material that is not adequately defined by the work itself. I see little difference between headcanon and the scholarly unpacking of ellipses found in the Bible – both symptoms of a figurative and literal religious fanaticism respectively. Early mascot-driven video games, as *Sonic the Hedgehog* is and *Space Invader* is not, are the perfect storm for headcanon due their home-console's

technical inability to include detailed explanatory content such as voice-acting, animated cut-scenes, and the like; thus leaving the bare-essentials for deciphering a cohesive narrative. What drives the gamer to make sense of and elaborate on the rickety plot of *Sonic the Hedgehog* is the well-defined qualities the creators have signified in their protagonists. The gamer is in control of Sonic and, by design, the artist must make the player identify with him to remain immersed in the simulation. No dialogue is present in the original Sonic the Hedgehog game, so in lieu of exposition, narrative, and character development, visualization takes priority. The spiky-blue haired, fast running, foot-tapping, red-shoed Sonic laid the groundwork for a now-iconic mascot with a definitive set of visual trademarks. Sonic's anthropomorphic design, as opposed to the human depiction of Mario, was meant to "transcend race and gender and things like that" according to the original design team. The loose story and the striking sense of identity lay the seeds of an Otaku subculture and ensuing metaculture.

As defined in "Database Animals" by Hiroki Azuma, the Otaku are "those who indulge in forms of subculture strongly linked to anime, video games, computers, science fiction, special-effects films, anime figurines, and so on" . A postmodernist trait of the Otaku is to create a work in response, or as an extension, of the source material, whether it be "fanzines, fan games, [or] fan figures". Given the insubstantial story or lack of expository content within the body-game of the original *Sonic the Hedgehog*, it introduces another dimension to Otskui Eiji's "grand narrative". Eiji discusses the grand narrative created by having a product as a source material: "Bikkuriman Chocolates [have] [...] no original television series or comic" thus differentiating it from Kamen Rider Snacks wherein its based-upon a television and manga series. This drives the consumer to uncover the narrative via the "accumulation of these small narratives" through the consumption of various products. However, the video-game medium, particularly the character-driven, narratively-dicey original *Sonic the Hedgehog,* drives the assemblage of narrative through the production "derivative work", headcanon, transmedia, and paratext rather than solely by the final product. The grand narrative, in the case of *Sonic the Hedgehog*, is the "fragments in the database extracted from the settings of the original" spread across franchise entries with contradictory continuities within television series, comic books, films, toys, and much-debated non main-line video games. Examining a plethora of YouTube videos, which qualify as Azuma's "derivative works", on the subject of the Sonic franchise's timeline, I've deduced that much of what is understood of the original games is derived from the aforementioned paratexts and transmedia rather than the game itself. In order to unpack the inexplicability of Sonic's lore, and as we'll uncover, the consensus regarding the franchises progression, I must attempt establish the storyline and franchises overarching

lore as it appears initially, before diving through paratext, spin-offs, later retconning, and mutually agreed upon headcanon of the games prior to its transition into 3D to lay the groundwork of what exactly is meant to be conveyed in these early games. A character driven, largely textless video game still exists as a fantasy, a piece of fiction. In order to make sense of the Sonic franchise as a narrative, one might approach its narrative comprehension in an intertextual semiotic context as one may when reading the reference-driven laden literature like *Ulysses* or *Paradise Lost*; however, the differing factor in the case of the Sonic franchise is that the intertext exists entirely within its own microcosm, its own franchise, and that in itself is disconcerted with continuity and timeline as evident in my most familiar entry, *Sonic Adventure,* who's dissociative relationship between the self-gamer and avatar, [Sonic], and its semiotic attempt at a representative Earth exemplifies the madness of continuity in mascot-oriented video games. The choice to make *Adventure* a narrative-concerned game when preceding entries were light on story and left much to be uncovered through paratext and fan speculation is perhaps a driving factor as to how a franchise can become massive, and notorious. I speculate without authority; only a cursory understanding through cultural osmosis and sophomoric empirical evidence. Yet, I'm certain a post and post postmodernist approach will find better analytical footing in puzzle-piecing together a functional Sonic mythos, and understanding multi-media franchise en-masse, than actual text does. As Otsuka Eiji's "Theory of Narrative Consumption" asserts, persistent franchises like Sonic - notably story-driven as it drudged on as opposed to the ludens-oriented Mario - is a collection of "small narratives" that suggest they coalesce into a "grand narrative", but do not always. A mascot-driven fandom asks questions like "What does Sonic the Hedgehog's bedroom look like?" (as I've taken out of context from Tim Rogers essay "Dreaming in An Empty Room"). On the surface, playing through the classic 2D *Sonic The Hedgehog* games while ignoring any exterior succeeding or concurrent *Sonic* media only offers a set of named locations, an array of mechanized enemies, and a recurrent arch-nemesis at the end of each zone. What makes the freshman entry of the Sonic franchise much more mysterious than Mario is in the latter's ancient archetype of story. Mario is saving a princess from a dastardly fantastical villain; a fairytale, a medieval conquest, a comic book story and so forth. This story is fundamentally familiar to the player by the time they reach a basic level of literacy. Sonic's pursuit is far-less clear. A capsule filled with cute animals is not analogous to Mario's Rapunzel narrative. Our collective understanding of Sonic comes from outside its initial outing, whether it be TV, comics, or call-backs in later games, and has fundamentally shaped the narratological understanding of *STH1*. In an MCU age, one that demands interconnectivity and continuity, these 90s games have to be reckoned with as canon through retcon, paratextual evidence, headcanon, and extrapolation. Comic book "worldviews" - defined by Ōtsuka as ways in which

fictional worlds were manufactured - like Sonic's is now - have changed the way we consume narrative. Yet, unlike the MCU, there is no definitive source for story and character regarding early Sonic, nor has there been a hard reboot establishing a new canon altogether. As mentioned on the 6th episode of the *Let's Talk About Sonic* podcast, hosted by Sonic the Hedgehog 2 (the film) end-credit artists Mitsame and CrappyBlue, claim that SEGA is not the definitive source for the series' lore. As of late 2022, Sonic Team is hiring a lore master to get their franchise canon in order – perfect timing. The fandom and SEGA alike understand the world of Sonic is a puzzling whirlwind of canon and contradictions - its the fuel to their fire.

I wish to fully unpack the Sonic mythos historically, meaning in chronological order, to find what makes its fanbase so infamous and rancorous, while paying particular interest to its stark characterization, broken lore, ellipses and fandom response to each entry over the past three decades, while also trying to simply understand the how and why Sonic has carried on amongst innumerable failed mascots of yesteryear.

Thus, I argue there is a third element distinct to video games that collate narratology, ludology, and aesthetics - characterization. The resonance of a mascot and the feeling emplaced upon them in tandem with whatever narrative, gameplay, and environment they are placed within. Characterization is distinct from aesthetics because it encompasses personality. Personality can be informed by gameplay; by ludological means; how it *feels* to take control of a character. Characterization, as distinct from these other areas of study, broadens our ability to make sense of these monolithic franchises by explicitly taking the non-narrative elements of the medium into account.

Video games have grown into a fundamental part of the media landscape: a champion breadwinner for entertainment companies during my coming-of-age and have yet to peak. It was not normal for a grown-up to game when I was a boy, but as my early-twenties came around, it quietly became status-quo. Fathers enraptured by gaming culture are indoctrinating their sons to be the same, as Andrea can attest to, like an MLG version of *Friday Night Lights*. Gamer is a complete identity, and they have finally integrated by growing into a certified demographic.

Angela Nagle's *Kill All Normies*[4] explores the origin point of our current socio-political paradigm by framing it as a binary of Tumblr and 4chan – the homes of the once-unironic LGBT progressives and once-ironic bigoted white alt-right respectively – but she fails to recognize internet speakeasies, in their preeminence, were havens places for gamers and Otakus: *Something Awful*, *GameFAQs*, *NeoGaf*, and ShareWare bulletin board systems (BBS). The digital battleground of ideas was forged in the fire of the console wars.

I was born a gamer; almost by default. I moved a lot, I was not athletically inclined, and it was a great unifier amongst the other boys at school. My adolescent internet literacy led to a deeper affinity for video game – they brought me a community during my schlemielian developmental years. My downcast misfit persona came from an unearned superiority complex stemming from my baby fat, patience for media, and glasses. I hope that my fellow nerds realize that they, in part, are at fault for their formative bullying experiences, like The 30 Rock episode "Reunion"where Liz Lemon attends her high-school reunion, expecting to give comeuppance to her oppressors, only to discover she was not the maligned nerd but, in fact, the judgmental bully. I, thankfully, reached this conclusion sans reunion in my teens via early onset 420blazeit syndrome.

My main online hang was a forum for the podcast Sarcastic Gamers. SG is now defunct due to the mistreatment of its writing staff by its infamously biting co-founder Lono – according to former forum members Shane86 and Yousty on a NeoGaf thread regarding the site's disappearance. Seemingly no archive exists – I've spent years looking for relics of the bygone message board and even reached out to a former admin; he's now a cryptocurrency serial entrepreneur and told me it's gone for good – thus my internet haunt only exists in the corrupted hard drive of my memory. Sarcastic Gamer had a community podcast feed wherein myself, and some other young members, had a show. We only made a few episodes. One of them included an infamous segment involving the performance of a piss-poor 'jive' voice from *Airplane!* that would get me fired from SNL if uncovered today. All this aside, my now-dispersed propinquity for gaming and gamer culture has made me keen-eared for the rumour mill. I'd always heard murmurs about apocryphal uncles and Japanese cousins who managed to get subbed anime on burnt DVDs and Mario on Xbox through crafty internet piracy. As it turns out, the Japanese cousin was real as he relayed plot details that proved true as Bleach and Naruto lagged behind in Canada. To this day, I greatly resent Jonathan for not lending me his cousin's bootleg Inuyasha discs – I speculated (incorrectly) that there might be visible T&A in the Japanese version. As I've come to learn decades later, this fantastical bootlegging is not only attainable but rather easy with a little patience and a LEGO-like ability to follow instructions. In my early research, a reoccuring unappetizing trait of video game YouTube personalities is a smug coyness regarding piracy and emulation – I noticed this recurrence in a vibrantly inarticulate review of Sonic 3D Blast by Garrulous64 – I suppose you have to justify a room filled with kitchy memorabilia and overpriced used games still-in-box with cloying IP vindication.

Twitter and Facebook were in their infancy during my message board years, podcasts were niche on-the-go talk radio, and "new games journalism" was in full effect. I idolized the hosts of Rebel FM, Giant Bomb, and Jim (now Stephanie) Sterling. I, however, largely abandoned gaming by the time I finished high school in favor of

traditional late-00s hipsterdom: Pitchfork, flannels, Criterion, psychedelics, and Million Dollar Extreme thus disengaged from non-self-promotional internet posting. My sentimentality regarding gamerdom lies predominantly in my memories of GameFaq, GameCube, and *Gotcha Force*, and not in Gaccha mechanics or GamerGate. Part of my fascination with Sonic's infamous fandom is that my online stomping grounds were homogeneously gamer oriented in a time before the current cultural tribalism. We all liked games, we all felt like outcasts and rarely gave a flying fuck about political correctness. Also, everyone was, by default, presumed a dude.

I concede that Discord is something of a forum 2.0 and have haphazardly engaged with it as such.

I have searched my memory and dug up some of these old online haunts, with the blue blur as my jumping-off point. I have used materials including instruction manuals, promotional content, spin-off media, and the aforementioned fan zeitgeist; considering changing sentiments through the retrospective perspective of fan content. I contend that writing critically on Video Games thrives in interpersonal anecdotes because of the interactive Subject-Object relationship caused by taking action rather than the passive consumption inherent in other media. In my experience, the humanities side of academia seems to be more welcoming of first-person perspective as they seek accountability and intersectionality to further focalize equity, equality, and attempt to rewrite the hegemonic inquiry of the past. The debate regarding perspective is nothing new to video-game journalism. The term "New Games Journalism" is a product of the discourse regarding author-centric writing versus pure textual analysis that rages in the academic world. I tend to side with Jeffries, in their Pop Matter article, as he suggests NGJ captures the essence of the medium: the game forces you to approach it from your own lens rather than imposing a specific viewpoint upon you. Brandon Sheffield of the *Insert Credit* podcast answered the question "what game has the best narrative?" with "the one you write yourself as you play". You are Sonic. I am Sonic. Our Sonic's are not the same. How do we reconcile our Sonics? In text.

The reconciliation of ephemeral narratology is the sustenance of fandom. In essence, an insular community of authors sharing their loosely analytical diary-esque op-eds on video games and engaging in spirited debate regarding one another's viewpoints. My formative modality of online interaction has since been diminished by multimedia social hubs, and the New Games Journalists I admire have generally settled into the more lucrative audio and video mediums rather than the written word alone. Reading through Tristan Donovan's breezily written book, Replay, I connected that both game and text play a pivotal, if not the starring, role in the contemporary technological landscape. Alan Turing tried to design a computer that could beat him at Chess. Chess is a game.

The first successful personal computers, The Commodore PET, the Apple II, and the TRS-80 Model, were not only successful as video-game playing devices, but were built on microprocessor technology first implemented by early Atari coin-op staff in the late 70s. Games are just software, software is just code, and code is just a written language, and written language is just text; albeit based upon intricate mathematics. I present my book about Sonic, video games, fandom, Sonic fandom, storytelling, and nostalgia in the medium of words as an ode to the textual internet forum and to exemplify text as the backbone of modernity. As far as I can tell, no one has written a confessional deep-dive novel on *Sonic The Hedgehog*. However, the fans have made a mountain, often figuratively molehills, of YouTube videos that constitute such descriptions. The burdensome research and time sunk into the benign subject of video game trivia is 'amazeballs' but in its aesthetically insubstantial form it is desperately 'weaksauce'. I despise the FunkoPop, plushy-ephemera decor. The shrill self-abasing gamer personality is anti-intellectual bleach to the eyes and ears. I imagine boomer parents shaking their vascular fists in bewilderment at their children for making a living with their capture cards, front-facing cameras, and collection of cartoon rat action figures. More often than not, this stuff is surface-level brain rot akin to the worst of daytime television or a hungover greasy spoon breakfast.

A hivemind consensus is created by the abject YouTuber allowing those who have not actively engaged with the source material to spout opinions thus eschewing the importance of hands-on experience and diversity of opinion. This is why I must become a Transformer: Escapist Optimus Durational Performance Art Piece refiguring into a new 2023 Dodge Undercover Investigative Journalist Truck Surrogate Father Figure wherein I consume myself with Sonic content to understand and extol the zealous state of the abject superfan so I can be the nanny I ought to be. I will NOT be some overeager dork-dad, but a relatable sage. Sourceless conjecture and half-baked recapitulated Wikia articles are the bread-and-butter of these dork-dad SonicTuber. A profound lack of the soul is omnipresent on YouTube compared to the hotheaded pseudo-anonymous days of a web gone by; we used to be willfully contentious. Some content creators, especially the meticulous and sparse, make impactful in an otherwise sea of vacuous soybean soup, many of whom I draw upon in this book; namely Tim Rogers and Cybershell in relation to the medium at hand. Neither Rogers nor Shell create what they do in the doting fever of recoupling – that is where my soul lies. My admiration is with the real Otakus: the DeviantArtists, the fangame designers, the chiptune musicians, the webcomic artists, the headcanon fanfictionistas, the unpaid lore scholars, the forum moderators – the creatives – and, of course, with Ms. Andrea Adamson and Harrison. I stand against the mouth-agape subscriber-starved regurgitators. No child needs that. I stand against Dunning–Kruger-esque consumption of responsive media and zeitgeist

without empirical experience – video games, more so than any other medium as they are meant to be played - although, to counter, sociologist Roger Caillois writes that "play tends to remove the very nature of the mysterious", and perhaps the consumption of Let's Plays and lore breakdowns keeps the game-at-hand, in part, mysterious to the viewers, however I doubt this is a conscious reason for indirect consumption. Nonetheless, I persist that nothing is more pretentious and intellectually troublesome than consuming takes without consuming the thing being taken first. This is 'cultural osmosis', and puts the importance of the 'osmosis' over the 'culture'.I often wonder, when reading academic articles, if the author has really seen or read everything they cite. They are entitled to some wiggle room, but it is in bad faith to cite blindly and squeeze on the itty bits of juice needed for their thetical recipe before tossing away the rest of the textual fruit. I am not special nor unique to undergo a completionist Sonic deep dive, nor am I the first Sonic author. I've uncovered and read two SEGA sanctioned and one unauthorized Sonic history book, *Speedrun* by Julian Hazeldine. However, I stand alone on solid ground as the fool-hearted Penelope of Neo-New Games Journalism – my Odysseus brought Telemachus along.

I have devised a series of gimmicks, experiments, and humorously loquacious self-effacements that should soothe the monotony of dissecting a video game franchise or lean into the platitudes when I feel appropriate. I have allowed myself rigorous unstructured writing and write this preface prior to beginning my draft of Sonic Engulfment[5] – a great title for a fan game. The Sonic fandom is among the most prolifically creative, relentlessly archival & metatextual, and undeniably deranged. I want in and I need a distraction. I want to do this justice. I hope this is meaningful. I want to feel what they feel, and bar none, I've done it on my own terms. I want to crush the trivial nonsense of video game YouTube. I want to sink my teeth into something fleshy. I want to be with Andrea again. I want to be her everything. Inshallah. I hope it doesn't fleet.

This is my hauntological hog song. My completionist escape. My war of attrition. My inverted *Ulysses*. My autodidactic romance.

Sonic the Hedgehog 1

On the Monotony of Video Games Writing

On Christmas Eve of 2022, nearly fifteen years after my days of Sarcastic Gamer, I beat the first Sonic in one sitting over some Guinness; the safest of beers, to be

poured into a glass. Andrea was not partial to dark beer unless its flavor palette was dessert-like; I shared a twelve-percent Creme Brule porter with her once at a fancy brew pub. This was not my first drunken playthrough of Sonic 1, nor Sonic 2, nor CD though. Through a video on Tail's Channel, a right-minded diamond in the impure gamer YouTube rough, I discovered the *Encyclo-speedia*, written by IDW Comics' Ian Flynn, was set to be released in late 2021 in commemoration of the blue blur's 30th anniversary. This was in September 2020. I was a part-time student, unemployed, and collecting legally gray-area unemployment insurance with unlimited coronavirus-lockdown hobbyism fueling my days. I started a podcast which lasted thirty-four episodes. It is defunct, although carefully archived to avoid its disappearance on the effervescent servers of others. A series of episodes, I had hoped, would circumvent my standard interview format by candidly deep-diving into early Sonic comics, tv shows, and games as a celebration of the anniversary and in anticipation of the *Ecyclo-speedia*. I did not finish these podcasts. I got as far as the *& Knuckles* portion, and thirty odd issues into the Archie comics. As I've now solidified, the joy of creation, for myself, is when the deadlines are loosely self-imposed. The podcast medium rarely thrives-and-survives without being rigidly scheduled, thus it fizzled out, although Tim Rogers' *The Action Button*, Dan Carlin, and *MartyrMade* are fantastic podcasts released intermittently. Would one call this current labor of love time sensitive? If it all plays out deftly, then yes, I'm a hypocrite. I do, as fate permitted, have about three hours of incomplete audio recordings that I have drawn in regard to the first four (and a half) mainline Sonic games: Sonic 1, Sonic 2, Sonic CD, and Sonic 3 & Knuckles – I will draw on these sparingly. Those runs were done on a Switch for the first game, and my now-liquidated PS2 for the rest.

Shortly after Andrea's sudden departure, my first impulse was to download a Genesis emulator for the 3DS I had borrowed and hastily jailbroken from Lee. The emulator, jEnesisDS, had a glitchy save state that drove me crazy after ripping through the first zone of *Sonic 1*, saving, and returning to the handheld only to find no evidence of a saved game. I hoped the 3DS would allow for a more casual passive playthrough than on my modded Wii, but to no avail. SEGA had just released a compilation of remastered classic mainline Sonic games, titled *Sonic Origins*. The selling feature of *Origins* echoes my lore fascination as it includes a plethora of archival material and a story mode with full-fledged cut-scenes that serve to retcon whatever story one would have piecemealed together in the 90s. The 'Origin' in the title implies a focus on lore: a prequel to the retconned future. For convenience's sake and for future research, I submitted to the 28 dollars it cost for four ancient and wildly available video games so I could play them comfortably on my PS4. I tacked on a four-dollar download of *Slime Rancher* too – a quirky first-person Pokémon homage with a title that fondly reminded

me of another Pokémon-esque game *Monster Rancher*. I haven't tried it yet, nor have I ever played the *Monster Rancher* games, but I did watch the anime on YTV. I chose to play the classic Sonic in widescreen. For now, I am ignoring the interstitial cutscenes, additional features and treating the games as if I were playing them as they originally appeared on the Genesis in 1991 despite the advent of a 16:9 ratio. As a fledgling Sonic scholar and a professional projectionist, I must treat aspect ratios with the utmost seriousness. After I completed a full playthrough of *Sonic Origins,* I experimented with different iterations through a number of emulated ports and rereleases including a ROM of the *Mega Collection* for GameCube, the beloved iOS remaster, and a legit Genesis.

I've now beaten *Sonic the Hedgehog* twelve times in seven different permutations.

The very first time I experienced *Sonic 1* was on a SEGA Genesis. It was chained and padlocked in a protective case and wired to a CRT TV in the lobby of PrimeMusic, a children's music studio in a strip mall in Sudbury, Ontario. It was 2003. I moved around a lot as a kid which causes location recall to distort into liminal moments and fragmentary geographic memory – a strip mall does this all by itself. The game felt very old compared to my N64. The lack of save-state forces arcade-style play wherein one loses all their lives and returns to square one. Therefore, I am intimately familiar with Green Hill Zone. The game was familiar; akin to the original NES Mario as I had enjoyed in its *Super Mario Bros Deluxe* form for the Gameboy Color, but was much aesthetically busier, modern, and closer to the anime aesthetic I was and am drawn to as a lifelong closet Otaku. 3D platformers, from *Spyro* to *Adventure*, were my bread and butter, and *Sonic* 1's gameplay ultimately didn't stimulate the simulacrum cybernetic realism of fifth-generation console games. This little music lesson spot introduced me to very primitive MIDI-oriented digital audio workspaces. I 'composed' theoryless odes to Dragon Ball Z such as "Fight with Buu" and "Going Super Saiyan". To this day, my creative process has hardly changed. The most appealing aspect of this place, aside from lobby Sonic and MuseScore junior, was a notably nerdy teacher who would regularly quote Homestar Runner's Coach Z's mispronunciation "good jorb" to my amusement. Still, I am mystified when internet humor unexpectedly appears in real-world day-to-day interactions. I disdain an "all the things' ' reference but welcome your best StrongBad impression. As I grew up in online spaces, I am quite familiar with Sonic fandom being ripe with ideas and phrases not meant for IRL.

Since the dog days of PrimeMusic, I have played *Sonic 1*, never to completion, through *Sonic Generations* as an unlockable bonus as well as a shaky port for the iPod Nano around the time of *Sonic 4*'s release. I finally beat it for the first time on the Nintendo Switch *SEGA Ages* rerelease during my abandoned 2021 podcast project. Tackling the Genesis games with a contemporary complete-and-delete style of play is ineffective for

maximizing enjoyment and understanding. In 1991, these games cost 60 dollars and could be beaten in roughly one hour by a skilled player – *Sonic 1*, in its brevity, is hyper-conscious of making its gameplay replayable. In the days of game rentals, developers padded games with time-sink mechanics and/or complex reward systems in order to prevent kids from getting a full experience out of a 7-day rental. Ed Azuma, creator of Ecco the Dolphin and SEGA employee, said it best: "I was paranoid about game rentals and kids beating the game over the weekend. So.. I.. uh... made it hard." One would have to be crazy in this modern age to play Classic Sonic games without a save-state or an unlimited lives cheat code on their first playthroughs. *Origins* is keenly aware of this and eschews lives and game overs completely. However, if I'm sentenced to return to that Waterloo strip mall to perform SEGA Genesis-only related community service, Green Hill Zone would be a perfect place to cut my teeth on the energetic, ruthless platforming gameplay of Classic Sonic. Green Hill Zone is an enigmatic Chad stepbrother of 1-1 in *Super Mario* that lead programmer Yuji Naka famously took influence from:

> "Back then, games didn't allow you to save your progress. So when you wanted to play Super Mario Bros., you always had to start from World 1-1.You could use the Warp Zones to skip many of the other levels, but you always had to play through World 1-1. Doing so eventually became kind of tedious, so I always tried to get through the level as fast as I could. And that inspired the initial concept for Sonic The Hedgehog."[6]

1-1 however, is not the beginning. An integral part of my driving thesis was to understand the fervor of the fandom, which involves engaging in personal anecdotes and other self-indulgences. While I hope you find them amusing, and I attest that they amplify the fandom aspect of my thesis, I have by proxy eschewed the responsibility to divulge much historical context and developmental tidbits regarding SEGA and the franchise as to distinguish myself as a singular narrative voice, distance myself from the Wikipedia-regurgitating YouTuber, and to not retread the ground plowed by Sonic Retro, Hazeldine, Pettus, Donovon, the Insert Credit guys, and others I've studied, yet upon considering some of the major criticisms of NGJ[7][8], I have conceded that it is only due process to write my own comprehensive history that lays the groundwork for the Hog at hand. I firmly believe drawing on first-hand sources give meaningful insight, although not gospel, into understanding a work, and furthermore gives fodder for internal fan debate[9] regarding the philosophical and narrative intent of a game; to truly feel out its ideology, its story, its emotions, its purpose, one must get their hands on it. Furthermore, 'game' trumps 'video' - video is but an adjective of game. Thus, it is only responsible to chart the subject before considering it in conjunction with its adjective.

At worst, this will give the reader a serious advantage when *Trivial Pursuit: Games Edition* makes its way to the tabletop; and so, I begin.

There is a non-preclusive dichotomy between Game and Gaming. Game is sportif at its core. A competition between multiple parties to see who is superior under a set of rules and/or confines; a competition protected by the "magic circle"[10]. This is play with the manufactured interior reward of victory. A game, unlike sport, does not require physicality or corporeal harm. Game is the inclusive term. However, the term Gaming, until recently, has always had some form of cultural connotation with gambling. Luck, as a mechanic, begets a gambling-friendly game, or metagaming. Metagaming, as I operationally define, is the act of betting on something outside the spectators' control which, I can only assume, was present as long as wealthy spectators of games existed. Gambling-games, however, are not metagames, but games wherein luck supersedes skill. The perfect gambling game creates a scenario wherein the corporal well-being of the gamer is not at stake, but the simulacra of livelihood is; I.E. money-gained or money-lost; The pangs of a lightened wallet; and a semblance of skill or, bar none, deduction works in tandem with luck – otherwise known as chance. In the case of sports betting, spectators are not 'playing' the game but have developed a metagame wherein they, too, have something at stake - the chance of picking the winner. Dice games, pure luck, create tense circumstances simulating the corporal game while retaining the player as the active participant, or, perhaps instead, the dice are the sportsman pushed into action by the metagamer. Superstition implants false chance onto a game of luck – like the Sports fan wearing the same jersey every night or the Dice thrower having a their wife blow on the die. The dopamine created from gambling, luck or chance game alike, is manufactured by the value placed on money thus the spectator in included beyond entertainment but not requiring to put their corporeal at self-at-stake, but the greenback symbol of their livelihood that creates the semi-safe dopamine-inducing hadron collider of gambling addiction.

Yet, we have play - you can not 'game' without 'playing' but you can play without gaming. Play implies stakes, or a lack thereof. It is acting beyond direct utility. It is doing it for the sake of itself. The utility is only derived from playing post factum.

Roger Callois, in influential book on games that precedes popular video gaming, *Man, Play, and Games,* defines five distinct forms of play

> 1. Free: in which playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion;
> 2. Separate: circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance;

3. Uncertain: the course of which cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player's initiative;
4. Unproductive: creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and, except for the exchange of property among the players, ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game;
5. Governed by rules: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts;
6. Make-believe: accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life (10-11)

While Callois does not explicitly state that these are preclusive terms, video games broadly fall under each of these categories, often qualifying under multiple at once. They are always *Free* - video games are not part of indentured servitude; not that I'm aware of at least. Online multiplayer games are *Separate*; only playable at a given moment in which matchmaking is feasible, or *Separate* because they're a fixed to their circumscribed hardware. *Uncertain*; you can lose. *Unproductive*; by Callois' definition, this is theoretically true although the blockchain may disagree. *Governed by Rules*, no doubt. *Make-Believe*; yes. Video games are structurally, historically and metaphysically the culmination of these forms of play, in totality and in microcosms. They have their footing in the addictive interior reward of the gambling-game, while functionally testing the skill of the player ala sports, removing financial simulacra from the Gaming, and, essentially simulating spectator through the 'video' portion of the 'video game', with a healthy dose of the cleromanctic *I Ching* gaming through chance and technotronic mysticism. Fearlessly, video games are the global totality of 'game'. While Nintendo is the oldest of iconographic video game companies, beginning in hanafuda Japanese playing cards in the 19th century, and electronic novelties in the late 60s, they were not an Internationalist[11] company. SEGA, formerly Standard Games, from the outset, was the result of well-traveled latitudinarian military men, privileged the opportunity to interact with Hawaiian, Japanese, and American cultures, following the global shift of the second world war, heartfully invested in global cultural crossover and uniting once-contentious cultures through a cross-sections of burgeoning international gaming modalities - pinball, gun-games, and coin-operated amusement machines. Martin Bromley, Irving Bromberg and James Humpert brought these machines to the world; Other people did too. Sonic himself is the product of SEGA's global market ideology: blur the lines between what is outright Japanese and what is parodically American. I recommend reading the exhaustive *Service Games* by Sam

Pettus for more insight on the subject of SEGA history, as well as a brief but rich article "The making of Sonic the Hedgehog" also by Pettus on Sonic's place in said history written for *Red Bull* - it features my favorite piece of little-known Sonic trivia: that Yuji Naka was inspired to pursue computer games by Ryuichi Sakamoto's satirical electronic group Yellow Magic Orchestra. I add that *Atari 50: the Anniversary Celebration* developed by Digital Eclipse for a hands-on museum of video game history at its outset, and the *They Create Worlds* podcast for savant-level oral histories of video games and any other video game subjects you may be curious about.

I'm no historian, nor do I find a particular interest in espousing a potpourri of historical facts and hearsay - that previous section was simply housekeeping and boring exposition with a touch of theory. I return now to an integral point of my thesis: the mascot that adjectives the mascot platformer - vaguely, the 'video' to the platformers 'games'. A mascot, according to *OED Online*, is "A person or thing that is supposed to bring good luck; (now) esp. something carried or displayed for this purpose. Also: a thing (often an animal or personified character) used by an organization, esp. a sports team, as a symbol or for good luck; an emblem". The mascot, it seems, is directly correlated to a product - a corporate character - yet, when there is character there are characteristics which are developed through experience which implies a story of said developments, thus there must always be *some* lore lingering inside them.

Mickey Mouse. Popeye. Mario. Betty Boop. The Robin of Robbin's Donuts. Superman. Spider-Man. Ronald McDonald. Tony the Tiger. Sonic the Hedgehog. Bomberman. Master Chief, Batman, Superman. Green Giant. Mr. Peanut. Yogi Bear. Hello Kitty. My Melody.

Mascots are unique narratively because they often represent something free of narrative - a central argument against postmodernity is outlined in *Database Animals* - wherein the organizing and obsessive over character traits and archetypes usurps the story. Video games are ripe for this type of attention, not just through interactivity but because narrative is secondary to game. Yet, *SEGA* can't help but try and tell a story, to make sense of its past, to explain it all away. A mascot is a synecdoche in flux.

Sonic's inaugural level showcases the franchise's central gameplay motifs: speed and exploration. On one hand, Naka proposed and effectively executed the ideal game for athletic speedrunning, while the option to navigate cleverly through the vertical geography of Green Hill rewards a pensive pace. Green Hill Zone establishes our heroes' de facto home as a paradisiacal grassy sanctuary in a welcoming manner that we see ad nauseam in future games and adaptations. Out the gate, we encounter a robotronic ladybug – the Moto Bug and our first Badnik[12]. We jump on our robot foe and out

comes an animal – not a ladybug but a chicken, bluebird, penguin, pig, or rabbit. Before we even stomp on the series-staple zone-ending capsule for the first time, Sonic 1 establishes itself as environmentalist through the liberation of animals. The game's North American manual's very first piece of paratextual lore states that "Dr. Ivo Robotnik is snatching innocent animals and turning them into evil robots". This was the early 90's as environmentalism began to grow amongst the game's American demographic. The successful *Captain Planet* cartoon series debuted one year prior to the cool blue rat's first entry and introduced big ideas to the Genesis generation such as recycling, pollution, overpopulation, and AIDS. I imagine my Sonic as a radical fan of Ted Kanzicsky, eagerly awaiting his 13th and 14th bombings, which took place shortly before the release of *Sonic CD* in 1993. Both Sonic and the Unabomber share environmentalist leanings without the hippie pacifism – albeit Sonic's vigilantism is a lot cuter. Violence is justified in *STH1* as the Badniks are entirely robots, though at the end of Green Hill he isn't afraid to square up with a chubby soviet doctor to protect his beloved bunnies. My first attempt at stand-up comedy, a short-lived ambition, was a bit about Sonic being a superior character to Mario because he saves animals and values good cardio rather than taking thinly coded psilocybin mushrooms and murdering an oversized turtle. Naka and gang waste no time introducing Sonic as hip, "cool", and a wonderful anthropomorphic role model, but not without eschewing a sliver of classic video game violence throughout. A true-blue product of the 90s. Green Hill is a tender pilot episode of lush flower power landscapes, inviting trial-and-error gameplay for the nubile player… until the final act. We start our final of three stages on a set of spikes, one of the Hog's fatal weaknesses. On the ground level, with a well-placed Moto Bug on the upper path, just out of site. The blueprint of act three is so unwelcoming and sadistic, it suggests that Naka met his level designers at a Munches convention. Thankfully, they had rather vanilla wives at home, so an invisibility item is hidden inside a tropical palm tree before the branding iron has a chance to reach temp. No less, the first boss is Robotnik with a dangling ball-and-chain. He's simple to beat if you follow a simple rhythmic back-and-forth pattern but takes a patient eight hits. According to my memory, I was allowed to attack the gimp-entendre boss mere frames after he appeared on-screen, yet my glossy *Origins* did not. The momentum full stop made me double-take. I took note to play an actual Genesis port as opposed to this gift-wrapped remaster by dusting off my jailbroken Wii, which I had stowed away in a Wal-Mart tote bag shortly after my time playing *Melee* with Lance to avoid an r/NeckBeardnests situation in my bedroom[13]. I speculate that yesteryear's grotesque gamer-den contagion stems from the oft-knotted nature of component cables.

The epochal Green Hill defied the Nintedon'ts through trendy aesthetics, an athletic spikey-haired mascot with a gentle learning curve, but the sophomore Marble Zone

feels like a different game altogether. Marble Zone feels more analogous to *Metroid* in aura than the established energy of our first zone. Marble Zone fails the mantra of Sonic's namesake: its not fast at all. But the maze of our second area evades the knee jerk reductionism of the platformer's journey – get from left to right without dying. It encourages exploration without confusing you. The rewards hidden for the Marble Zone treasure hunters are meant to excite on first play. "My sweet star-shine, you found something special off the beaten path" says Naka. Boxes on boxes of rings lay in succession early in the first act to pat the sprint-phobic explorer on their sweatless back. It teaches the overexcited hog-lad that their blue boy is not meant to overrun. Marble Zone doesn't just show virtue in slowing down – the entire level is designed to prohibit speed. Hand-eye platforming and simple block-pushing puzzles break up the action, but one particular Badnik breaks it altogether. Most of Caterkiller's pixel-space will damage Sonic, and upon defeating him, little balls of pointy Caterkiller corpse bounce around the screen. CyberShell's Badnik "cunt-o-meter" puts Caterkiller at a three, but I'd argue C.K. is easily a six. The Caterkiller is akin to a quick-forgotten off-screen green shell in the first *Super Mario;* he may be off-screen but he hasn't left the game. Many remasters of *STH1* add a spin-dash that makes it far easier to crush C.Ks, but upon playing a proper Genesis port, sans spin-dash, on *Sonic Mega Collection*, my twitchy muscles memory repeatedly failed to eradicate them in the tight crevices of act two. Unforgiving magma pits, while irritating during the back-to-square-one vertical climb of the final act as you approach the boss, teach the gamer invisibility-abuse as a touchstone of antiquated platformers necessary to enjoy the game. The r/SonicTheHedgehog Discord group suggests this is the noob-killer level that stopped generations of gamers from further exploring the picturesque landscapes of *STH1*. For that, it rattles in my mind like a repeated dream beyond the iconography of Green Hill. Furthermore, I speculate that Yasuhara used level designs lying around that he reappropriated for *STH1*, and that it was approved as a stop-gap for the aforementioned contemporary rental-protection game design. However, Green Hill and Marble Zone are so carefully plotted to allow moments of revival by way of the novel ring-life system that it is distinct from the arcadian design that makes its predecessors feel so obtuse nowadays.

It is narratively preposterous to up the Hollow Earth mysticism of Marble Zone with a casino level. Over my myriad playthroughs, I tried to find a cohesive visual chronology given the lack of in-game textposition, but I can't fathom Naka and Co's continuity logos; Spring Yard is not aesthetically apropos, like a chapter skipped. Marble Zone's upper crust maintains an astroturf green giving the first levels a sensible colourway sequence yet we are suddenly transported to a bouncy gamblers' paradise. Speed is certainly recentered, but the difficulty curve is disrupted – this zone is a cakewalk[14].

STH1 contrasts its prepossessing natural scenery, uncaged animals, and classical architecture with demonic gentrified retrofuturism. Spring Yard Zone fits only with the latter – a capitalist speakeasy, a conceit for the utmost of hedonistic human degeneracy. Spring: the bouncy obstacle and the season of cleaning are not the defining feature of this level – the title is not apropos. It contains myriad springs indeed, but it is wholly a caricature of Las Vegas. Spring is not the season of gambling and energy-storing elasticized metal is not a formal trait of the first *Hangover* films. Preposterous. Despite its misleading nomenclature, Spring Yard Zone's vertical exploration is exhilarating. The passages feel earnestly hidden - enigma is the prime mover of sustained legacy; take the ridiculous *Room 347* exploring the cult-like obsession with Stanley Kubrick's attention to detail in *The Shining*. The player, myself, feels cork-board-and-string world building / conspiracy theory enthusiasm while uncovering new routes and precious items of curiosity. The ever-moving staircases are very similar in their challenge. Daunting at first, but wondrously simple in execution. In contrast to the souffle fire-pits and puff pastry mortal platforms of Marble Zone, the stairs are a Hungryman microwave steak dinner The apparent but untrue visual implication of the too-and-fro staircases tuckered in the upper areas of the zone is a master stroke of graphic design; it's satisfying to hop over them yet it's not frustrating or something that requires much repeat risk-reward learnedness. The rate of tribulation and developing sense of the overarching world are eschewed, but the gameplay – the fun – flourishes in Spring Yard.

Cope. Spring Yard's post-modern postcard poem: "Cope". "Cope". Cope. We are presented with Cope burned in Vegas-like neon lettering. The Japanese version of *STH1* reads Cope too. Copium: A portmanteau of cope and opium, originating in regard to conspiratorial hip-hop fans attempting to piece-meal together disparate rumors in hope - hopium - for an upcoming Kanye West album. I think it's simple: Eggman put it there to tease young Sonic. Or, as GameFaq users suggest, it's a hint towards Gavin Felgate, an urban legend secret boss and/or inside joke gone wrong, or, according to a source I unfortunately no longer recall, a 'digitizer' used by the Sonic Team to-be. I like the neon Cope sign. I like it as a sinister tease; as an implication, as a peace of world building: Eggman knows the Hog is coming, and that it ain't easy… and, my spiny mammal foe… it's not gonna get any easier from here on out.

The Labyrinth zone, even without rabid consultation, is discernibly polarizing. By design, it slows-up and trips-up the man behind the controller – not inherently fun in its impertinence in contrast to Marble Zone's abrupt change in game-feel: water. Water is a contentious part of the mascot platformer taxonomy - I know this through cultural osmosis as, I'm sure, even the gamer does as well. The 'water level' is a part of the video game ecosystem - but video games are simulacra… this ecosystem is man made.

The dispute regarding the 'water level', and what it does, functionally, is not a necessary part of its ecology however. The 'water level', I speculate, is a way to not let a good steak overcook, to not 'burn out' a gimmick, to avoid sugary yum-yum mechanics growing stale and bitter, to break up the action. It is a denouement mid-narrative - best when the narrative is secondary… lest we forget that 'game' really comes before 'video'. My early recollection of water levels are not particularly positive. I abandoned *Ocarina of Time*, I tried to tread in *Super Mario*, and I would huff and puff at Sonic's immoderate "hugh" exclamations in *Adventure*. However, there is a new obstacle created in *STH1* by water: a time trial, and speed is relative to time. Hedgehogs are not known for their supersonic speed, yet, surprisingly, Sonic's relationship with water is anthropomorphically accurate. *Hedgehog World* – a website about the animal not the world's most famous fictional Erinaceidae – suggests "these animals are small, but they are covered with spiky quills that are filled with air. This helps to make them float should they enter water. So in general, the answer is yes! Most hedgehogs are able to swim well". Sonic, while brought to a near-halt, can roll around underwater far longer than I can albeit at a snail's pace relative to land. Anxiety is introduced to the young gamer through the count-down music before he drowns. Masterful tension-building, but too clunky, slow, and unfun in the underwater gravity for this to be an earned anxiety. Unearned anxiety must be quelled. Naka and company, through discordant rising tempos and an onscreen countdown, beg you to rush through the underwater labyrinth. This is compelled speed, not mechanical. This level is functionally expanding the hog's modus operandi. It's Cinematic, even, like the most thrilling scene in the recent *Indiana Jones* film - an underwater treasure-hunt filled with mythology, technological conceits, and looming death. I thought that movie was a hell of a good time - if you like Phoebe Waller Bridge, pulpy adventure, parodic Nazi bad guys played by internet darling Mad Mikkelson, brazen alternative history, and ludicrous polytheistic archaeological MacGuffins, check it out. Unlike *Indiana Jones 5*'s frivolous science fiction climax, Labyrinth Zone's finest moment is at the end: a unique zone-closer boss 'fight' wherein the withheld kinetic speed is finally unleashed in frantic vertical platforming glory in pursuit if Robotnik's Egg Mobile. The lessons taught in previous zones are undermined - 8 hits to kill them no more - speed, free of water, and platforming are on full display. Vertical platforming, I add. The Egg Mobile battle exemplifies my current belief that Sonic is not a horizontal from right to left - a metaphor for submission to wageslavery, perhaps- but about finding a better path within the horizontal hegemony by taking time to circumnavigate the vertical - something godly or spiritual, perhaps. Harrison, this project is vertical.

In Star Light zone, Sonic begins to flirt with industrial-goth aesthetics dominant in *Sonic Prime*; in this case, the animal Trent wants to fuck you like is a Hedgehog. I've read

somewhere, I think, that *Star Wars* was a big influence on Sonic, but really, circa 1991, what blockbuster media wasn't inspired by *Star Wars*; more on that later, maybe. Construction signs and yellow hazard signposts imply that this is an industrial project of Dr. Eggman in the late stages of assemblage. Maybe, a normal city just outside a metropolis before his gentrification. Eggman was kind enough to provide some skate-parkely ups and downs to navigate; the best and most platform-gamey zone thus far.

Scrap Brain zone: "We're in "Doctor Eggman's secret base. [...] There's also a submerged cave underneath the base" according to the Japanese manual. The opus of *STH1*'s level design. Part maze, part Tony Hawk rollerblade ramp, and part climactic child-scaring pandemonium. Scrap Brain seamlessly blurs in the memory as with Star Light - the classic black-and-grey action movie end zone. The final stage is a touch anti-climatic. Sonic dodges lazer balls and has momentary relief in which he can attack an entubed Eggman from either the left or right side. Eggman, defeated, flies off before you hit him one last time, sending him and his floating hovercraft tumbling into the industrial abyss. Sonic runs home, and finally his animal buddies are free from gentrification and developmental torment. However, if you complete the game without collecting the chaos emeralds, it is suggested that Eggman has survived and left off with the macguffin.

To get this unspectacular secret ending, one must hold fifty rings upon completing a stage, which will take them into a special pinball-meets-marble-maze area. The special stages set the loric mystery that attracted me to this franchise from the outset. Their bright, eccentric, and in the Edward Said sense, exciting, exotic, and 'Oriental" feeling - at least to a North American child circa 1991. It elevates *STH1* beyond arcade-y platform to something worth trying for - a mystery, a bright colourful, MacGuffin mystery. But, its not as fleshed out as it might become, but enough food for thought to plate the dish of curiosity. If enigma is the crux of eternal art, then Sonic 1 is forever[15].

Frustratingly, I stumbled upon a rather marvelous work of media analysis called "SERIOUS SONIC LORE ANALYSIS " by YouTuber hbomberguy after writing this slapdash attempt at a review. He has done what I have set out to do in eleven minutes with gusto, perspicacity and a rigid ability to weave big-picture politics into the baron storytelling of *STH1*. His video is limited to the blue blurs' first outing, so I have him on that. Nonetheless, instead of peppering in loose citations from his analysis, I will summarize it in brief, then refute some of hbomberguy's conjured lore.

Hbomberguy suggests *STH1* is a brooding, serious story of class uprising amidst a genocidal dictatorial regime. Sonic is 'the' Hedgehog because he is the final of his species. He proves this given Robotnik's enslavement of the animal population. Sonic 'the only' Hedgehog is seeking vengeance upon the industrial tyrant in a solitary civilian

uprising… and succeeds. Hbomber believes that *STH1* is asking if violence is appropriate in certain political contexts and answers the question with a resounding 'yes' evident through the apparent, although canonically untrue, death of Robotnik. He is shrewd to point to the progression from rolling-green Green Hill to the industrial hellscape of Scrap Yard as a visual signal towards an unpleasant industrialized slave state.

Hbomber is right, in part. Sonic's loric through-thread is underground revolutionary imagery. Without getting ahead of myself, he is the central figure of the Freedom Fighters in the Archie Comic. My memories of those early comics I read during the aborted podcast show the blue blur advocating for a king. Archie Sonic may present Robotnik as a quasi-Cromwellian type, and Sonic as a noble liege to the crown. However, we are staying firmly in 1991, as hbomberguy did and, even onwards, the whole Princess Sally and King Acorn lore is strictly for TV and Comics. However, I still refute *STH1* as an explicitly anti-capitalist endeavour. Robotnik's visuality alone is reminiscent of Stalin. The bad-guy is red, the good-guy is blue. Stalinism is the intersection of communism and totalitarianism, which aligns rather well with the Doctor's dystopia. Although I've heard recent campus commies tout Stalinist sympathies, namely citing of the recently translated *Stalin: History and Critique of a Black Legend* by Domenico Losurdo which I doubt I'll ever read. Regardless, I view *STH1* Sonic as a breed of socialist-libertarian. I call Sonic a libertarian simply because of Green Hill's absence of solitary leadership, nominal or otherwise. An agrarian, live-off-the-land libertarian, to clarify. We know Green Hill is Sonic's home through the finale – upon defeating Eggman he returns to the first zone and celebrates amongst his animal pals. I like the idea that Sonic is 'the only' Hedgehog on a decolonial hero's journey of vengeance, but I dismiss that it is explicitly anti-capitalist, rather that capitalism has little to do with it at all. Sonic's politics are akin to a modernist 'return to the old ways'[16], perhaps something akin to a Qing era China wherein 90% of the population made a living via agriculture sans the brutal landlording.

A popular reddit post by u/Meneillos suggests that *STH1* is "a metaphor for the cold war" – it's actually an allegory, but whatever. They say, in short, that Sonic is the mighty capital B blue - an American not *necessarily* a democrat - outpacing the soviets and winning the space race. For one, Robotnik has already won the figurative space race, as we see through his superior technology in contrast to Sonic's agrarian proclivities. Robotnik has only lost the literal race-race… Sonic is faster and defeats him in the end – the inclusion of outer-space imagery and technology dismantles this reading as a metaphor or an allegory as it is represented directly. For the most part, I agree with u/Meneillos' belief that Robotnik is a parody of Stalin, but to suggest Sonic is a

capitalist American is ignoring his agrarian ideals. His ideal society, with his gaggle of animals and well-maintained georgic environment, bar-none, represent a socialist, a libertarian, or a radical off-the-grid anarchist rebel.

I found a differing, mysterious allegorical theory buried deep in the comment section of u/Meneillos's post.

> Sonic the Hedge hog is a metaphor for the Orion Star Seed (Blue Ray) .look it up. much effort to confuse. also watch "Star Man" circa 1984. Let me know if you find anything cool!
>
> Leaving this stone unturned.

Sonic The Hedgehog (8-Bit)

On* "The Map" as made famous by Nickelodeon series *Dora the Explorer

Handheld *Sonic 1* features only a feather of effervescent creativity compared to the peacock's plumage in *STH1*. It has a map though. An un-Sonic autoscroll level Bridge zone. But, for the lore scholars, we have a map now. Now that we have an established basis for what becomes a colossal high-octane mega-franchise, we must look to its first minor entry – a handheld spin-off demake – and elucidate what is at the heart of the hog: What makes a Sonic game a Sonic game?

/u/IHateAngryBirds[17] on the Reddit thread "What kind of game does "Sonic the Hedgehog" need to be?" posted on r/Games in 2014.

> [Referring to the contemporaneous *Sonic Generations*] Pure Sonic focus (no annoying side characters), the levels were linear yet had multiple paths, speed was a focus (face it a Sonic game without speed isn't a Sonic game), the controls were spot on, and the game had no silly story forced upon you every 5 minutes.

But, lorically, we have a map now. The trailer for the 2019 live-action *Dora The Explorer* film cast a disconcerting spell of arousal upon the audience of *Venom* when I saw it. The map features an island that houses the events of *STH1* for the SEGA Mega Drive (the European name for the Genesis – how cosmopolitan!). *Dora*'s compelled participatory format — "Swiper no Swiping" for example – is pleasantly jejune and, also, grating and perfunctory, much like most *STH1* for the Game Gear. I had very little patience for the immobility of the benignly named Bridge Zone's autoscrolling; however

its theme, a melodic predecessor interpolated in *Adventure*'s iconic Tail's anthem "Believe in Yourself", is a masterstroke of parasitically catchy game music. I'd welcome a Bridge Zone if it referred to the care-home pass time, or the delectable chocolate-covered mélange consisting of nuts, fruits, and "crèmes", care-home contraband, but I'll settle for the ear-candy. I was introduced to bridge mix as an impeccable stoner snack by PSN's Hank Moody, James, in the late aughts. Labyrinth Zone is slower, wetter, and vapider than its 16-bit counterpart. The Labyrinth Zone is on the map. Allow me to find the instruction manual, preferably a fan-translated Japanese version, that is where the meatiest of Otakuism lies, I'm sure. The "South Island" they call this place, according to the booklet archived and translated on *Sonic Retro*. No mention of South Island in the North American instructions. Nor a mention of Mobius; Mobius is the planet Sonic inhabits. A 1992 GamePro review – not so much a review as a description — by Rigor Mortis – fun pseudonym — of *STH 8-Bit* claims Sonic "returns to Mobius" in this outing. I am curious as to where he — presumably 'he' as its a 1992 issue of GamePro – found the gall to claim this game is on Mobius? The Sonic Wikia claims "The name "Mobius" was not used by the authors of the games' Japanese manuals; the earliest use of the word was in the later drafts of the Sonic Bible which referred to Mobius as Sonic's home planet. It was later used in the Sonic the Hedgehog promotional comic and the Stay Sonic guidebook". Mr. Mortis was unlikely to have been privy to the Sonic Bible, but the Sonic the Hedgehog promotional comic mentioned predates the write-up by a year, according to the Wikia. I will have to read the Sonic promotional comic to sharpen my lore knowledge.

To conclude, I was awestruck by the elements of the final level. It felt adventurous and cinematic in its George Lucasian rising action. Play-wise, she made me tense navigating the electrical grid, although the succeeding maze was a guessing game without any discernible logic learned in the preceding levels. Not a good game. I won't play it again.

Sonic the Hedgehog 2

On Otaku Anthropology

The scope of the previous chapter needs to be reconsidered. "Not a good game, I won't play it again" is pithy, lazy, sophomoric, and weaksauce. I am by no means an aficionado nor a proficient player prior to writing this. Rarely, in my childhood, did I beat any games. I retired from the medium long-ago; save for the occasional stoned visit to the console for a guided meditation by way of thatgamecompany's *Journey* and

Flower. I am still 'nice with it' at fighting games as *Smash Bros* and the *Budokais* sands took a lofty share of my childhood's hourglass. Yet, the mascot platformer at hand is a Namekian light-year away from the comic fisticuffs simulators I once adored. I am an adult: I can buy M-rated games from the most gung-ho ESRB enforcing GameStop employee without ID… so, as an M-rated person, I have no excuse for being a neophyte. As a stopgap father, I should be as versed as the *Mahabharata*. Research. I disdainfully call to mind playing *Apex Legends* with James. He curtly requested I play with others – his oafish gaming buddy called me a "docile noob" – that man is literally docile because he is 400 pounds, unemployed, in his late-30s and has strong opinions about *Minecraft*[18]. I must become a virtual virtual athlete; a competition ready martial artist of 2D mascot platforming; MLG, if I may. If not, hands-on time with the mascot platformers' oeuvre will give way to expert status. A student of the craft. C.S. Lewis sums it well: "The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know what it is – what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used". This goes for anything confined to genre-and-medium. Milton could not write nor could we read *Paradise Lost* without considering its genre and medium: epic poem, its genre, its form, a book. But within that framework is anthropology and paratext. The epic is of Homeric origin; the poem, god only knows. Here, however, I am in the throes of the 2D mascot platforming video game. We have 2D dimensional animation, pioneered by Disney. We have the animated mascot, also pioneered by Disney. We have the platformer, iconized by Nintendo, I suppose, which I will disrobe shortly. And we have the video game, as discussed in the intro. To understand *Sonic 1* in its fullest, I must understand its forbearance. I find it is easy to unconsciously use categorical errors as the harrier of media criticism. When I saw *The Fabelmans* with a few zoomer coworkers of mine – none of whom particularly liked it – I witnessed a consensus emerge from a categorical error. Their chief animadversions were regarding the Sam character – analogous for a young Spielberg – as feeling cursory… but this is the fixed content of the film. Spielberg's vignettisisms and coming-of-age aspects defy their erroneous critical verbosity. It is a family ensemble focusing on the autobiographical stand-in's relationship to said family unit. This is what *Fabelmans* categorically is, it does not mean you must enjoy what Spielberg has made, but you can not say it fails to be something it is categorically not. *Fabelman*s is about Spielberg's memory of his family and upbringing filtered through the medium he is so gifted in, not implicitly a one-to-one story of little Spielberg. It is a love letter to his engineer father and artist mother for gifting him with his unparalleled pragmatism, not about his first pubic hair. Andrea was above the categorical error: I complained about the lack of dramatic depth and over-use of comedy when we watched *Big Hero 6,* and she said, simply, "it's not that deep, really. I thought it was a great kids movie". Although, one could argue that her deceptive *Sonic* (the movie) is "just a movie" is beautifully

dubious counter categorically misidentifying her taste. Mindful anthropology regarding category is the antidote to, as Anne Brontë puts it, “the poison of detracting tongues"[19]. It is one to read, or to consume, and it is another to understand. I wouldn't criticize *Doom 64* for lacking realism because it is *Doom 64,* not *The 400 Blows*. To analyze within a genre, one must pull back and look at the scope their subject fits within first. Broad strokes are only to be used sparingly, as one may criticize *Doom 64* for not being *STH1*, as they are both video games, but otherwise they are categorically different. *Doom 64* is not a Sonic game. Yet, the fandom suggests the collected work of Sonic the Hedgehog is brimming with games that are not Sonic games. Informed specificity fosters well-informed insight. The insights I have uncovered may shock you…

Firstly, I considered revisiting entries in the Mario and Mega Man franchises’ that ran concurrently and served as precursors to *Sonic 1*. This is undoubtedly necessary, as they are self-evidently the quintessential counterpoints to Sonic. I began a replay of *Super Mario Deluxe* on my modded 3DS early in this writing and prior to this epiphany as I had handily installed it before this excursion began.

Secondly, I considered the epoch of 1991 and what a boy like me may have been drawn to at the time. In period pieces, set designers often choose furniture and clothing that come from that exact place and time, rather than the more realistic decoration that are accrued over an elongated preceding past. Look around, wherever you are, and you will see that not everything is of the immediate now. And if it is, Godspeed.

Thirdly, I considered the unlikelihood that the average person owned both a Nintendo Entertainment System and a SEGA Genesis all at once in 1991.

Fourthly, I considered the anthropological video-game roots of *STH1*’s gameplay, artwork, and overarching design preceding 1991.

I began to download a gaggle of emulators along with their appropriate ROMs to play on my Wii, 3DS, and PC as advised by YouTube videos, forum posts, Wikipedia articles, books, podcasts and online GameRanking lists over the course of a quiet January evening as to what may fall under the listed criteria. The next day, under the influence of a 5MG THC capsule while struggling to beat *Sonic 2* Genesis-style (without a save state) and before writing the ensuing *Sonic 2* chapter, I picked the game I perceived to be the easiest: *Castle of Illusions Starring Mickey Mouse* for the Genesis.

Castle of Illusions meets all the above criteria. A 1990 SEGA-exclusive platforming game starring a global mascot. Mickey Mouse is undoubtedly the Mario of cartoon

characters. Sonic, however, is unfortunately not the Mickey Mouse of anything, although he shares colorful anthropomorphic design with Walt Disney's iconographic mascot. In the prosaic prose of *Speedrun: An Unauthorized History of Sonic The Hedgehog*, Julian Hazeldine suggests that Disney and SEGA's platformer partnership is not quite vis-à-vis Mario, but nonetheless operated as a functional precursor to hyping up the hog; he's right. The early tracts feature a grassy knoll, a ghoulish antiquated grave site, and an aquatic sandstone labyrinth; quite familiar. Our operational MacGuffin is in search of seven emeralds that will save Minnie from a maniacal enchantress mousenapper. *Illusions* is gentler than *STH1*; it gives you multiple ways to attack by tossing apples – borrowed from SEGA's earlier mascot platformer *Wonder Boy* in which my ROM seemed to be missing fundamental textures for progressing beyond the second area – and a drop-jump mechanic that's not self-evident nor user-friendly. A second tap on the jump button midair turns Mickey's bottom into a deadly weapon. When executed perfectly – and what constitutes a perfect ground-pound is beyond me – you bounce high in the sky where you find out-of-reach goodies. It took me mid-way to the second level to realize this. My video game literacy – at the time of playing *Illusions* – is at a kindergarten level. I found the rhythm shortly thereafter, but found myself lost on the third level. Do I weaponize my neo-strategy guide at-hand: YouTube or GameFAQs or a PDF of the strategy guide to remain firmly within my epochal confines? Or do I continue my simulation as a yellow belt gamer from the early 90s without aid? I listened to the number one album of 1989, Madonna's *Like a Prayer* – the inferior sequel to her all-gas no-brakes sophomore effort *Like a Virgin* – and soldiered on. The third level is the final direct parallel to *Sonic 1*'s form: a quasi-Mesopotamian labyrinth featuring oodles of H20. Mickey's movements, as I grew comfortable navigating the *Castle,* were palpably sluggish and finicky apropos a single D-pad press translating to disquieting frames of movement on screen. *Castle of Illusions*, if anything, teaches the syntax of original platformers: synaptic arcade-style trial and error through a punishing save/life system and a fine balance of time-trial-high-score rushing and soaking up the scenery. *Castle of Illusion*'s ultimate blunder is exploring non-linear level design. The intended route is never obvious when the left-to-right contract implicit of the genre is broken. Mickey is lost and nomadic because of unclear, illogical, unsatisfying cartography wherein the player isn't provided with any in-game dopamine upon back-tracking. Figuring it out on my own didn't make me feel smart, nor did its barebones attack system make me feel nimble. Pavlov would disapprove of *Illusions'* inability to condition the player through satisfying pattern repetition; Pavlov's dog would be frothing – not drooling – at the mouth. I do tip my propeller mouse-ears hat to the boss battles, though. All-in-all vibrant, suitably challenging, and ramps up as you progress with a climatic gravitas. I give it a *Pirates of Caribbean* ride out of ten, but it's a ways away from the *California Screamin'* nor *Tower of Terror*. *Ducktales* for the

NES had the same intuitiveness or lack-thereof with a jump-attack mechanic, which took me roughly 15 minutes and 15 lives to figure out; I don't wish to write about *Ducktales*.

Alex Kidd in Miracle World is, by all accounts, the spiritual predecessor to Sonic as an attempt at capitalizing on the Marious mascot craze. I listened to the ephemeral-oughts self-help hit *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrnes on audiobook, free on YouTube as it's not worth a precious Audible credit, while playing through *Kidd 1*. If any of my younger readers have seen *Magnolia* or perhaps, with the incurrent third rise of emo, *Donnie Darko*, think Tom Cruise and Patrick Swayze's characters respectively and you'll know what *The Secret* is all about. *The Secret* says, outright, that "thinking fat thoughts" is why I'm 237 pounds, but I chalk it up to my high-carbohydrate diet and propensity for binge-drinking & bridge mix. I concede to Bryne's awkwardly plain prose as they give a discerning reader a gateway into simple Mindfulness practice as a method of staving off uncontrollable frustration. I managed to use Byrne's laws of attraction to complete *Alex*'s asinine Rock Paper Scissors boss battles; by laws of attraction, I mean my newly-downloaded lightweight multi-console emulator WiiMednafen's quick save-state function along with my increasing hand-eye-pattern memorization ergo senseless hours of retro platforming. *The Secret* did not help me complete *Alex Kidd* because positive thinking does not help you figure out that the final boss is a puzzle – the only real puzzle in the game. After some distance from the new-age multi-level-marketing nonsense, I did scholarian soul-searching, and came to admire its mode-switch finale, like an appreciation of "Revolution No. 9" to *Miracle World*'s real-listened copy of the *White Album*. It is discouraging in its multiplicity gameplay and unforgiving in its arcade-style Game Over mechanic, but for a 1984 Master-System game, it's inspired in its extravagant postmodern whimsy vis a vis its genre-defying primitive climactic brain games.

Bonk's Adventure is a vibrant Toriyama-esque dream; kooky child's play. Krillen's Odyssey would be a fitting title for the bald-headed simpleton mascot we call Bonk. Bonk is easy to the degree of tranquility, yet it incorporates a bizarre gimmick – a superpowered cranium – that sparks rich exploratory curiosity. *Bonk 1* is minuscule in design – no chaos emeralds nor much for hidden pathways – but it is titanous in spirit. What my blue hog could learn from Bonk is how to effectively incorporate a peculiar mission-statement into the rigidity of overarching form. Both bitrates of *STH1* have moments of The Flashian speed, but with sparsity contrary to its mascot's defining feature. Baby caveman Stanley Tucci is congruent with his moniker: he bonks. The boss battles are succinctly bonk-forward. Bonk is, as you may have guessed, all about bonkin'. Bonk, from his Medieval Times looking drumstick to his spazzy powered-up sprite animations, is brimful of whimsy, camp, and effervescent joy far more brazen and

loony than the contemporaries that outlived him. *Bonk 1* is the best non-fighting *Dragon Ball* game; one that captures the essence of Kid Goku, an overpowered exuberant anime boy, honing his skills with bright-eyed dinosaur sparring partners. I played the NES port first; but upon further research I realized my console hegemony had failed me. As an ignorant Nintendo-SEGA supremacist, I failed to recognize that *Bonk NES* was a "de-make", as put by inoffensively temperate SEGA Lord X in his informative Bonk retrospective, of the indigenous TurboGrafx16 release. It appeared incomparably sleek to the NES and Genesis oeuvre so I rushed to play the original while adding a plethora of well-regarded games from the TGX16's canonically omitted library to my SD card. *Bonk's Revenge*, in short, is similar, but better.

Super Mario is foundational, fundamental, and brilliantly paced. Its slow drip of new mechanics and twitchy platforming are a sight to behold. The game, however, is a touch panged by its arcade-style riskiness. It begs for repetition in excess due to its difficult hand-eye skill testing design. *Mario* is, in all earnestness, a much faster game than *Sonic the Hedgehog* – the machine gun projectiles of the Hammer Brothers are neigh ripe for a painstakers approach. A moment of complete and utter brilliance undermentioned by the trove of *Mario* critics and scholars is the leap of faith in 8-2. The jump appears impossible, no visible platform is seen on the other side. But with a well-performed running start, the background scrolls forward as Mario flies through the air, and lands to safety. 8-2 transcends the early notion of video games as an arcade crack-pipe lit up by endless inserted quarters – this is cinema, Spielbergian, soul. You've gotten so far, through the trials and tribulations of changing gravity water levels, far superior to Labyrinth Zone, a Mona Lisa eyed cloud monster dropping a hellfire of turtles, and are only a stone's throw away from finally finding the alluded 'other castle' containing of damsel in distress. The leap of faith is the climax; all the following is simply denouement. Nonetheless, *Sonic* is more pleasant, a more well-defined pastoral place to kick-back in, and gentle towards the player in regard to life-lost due to the ring collection mechanic, albeit more punishing in defeat than *Mario* because one anticipates less death. In Mike Leigh's *Naked*, a depressed bibliophile/overnight security guard suggests the protagonist's doomsday preaching is benign as he has actualized his past life and anticipates a next. *Naked*'s lead has Naka's approach to death: fear and nihilistic despondency. Miyamoto is the tragic, wise security guard: hopeful and willing to repeat life with hope for a brighter future while learning from his past self.

Super Mario 2 is a historic anomaly; a truly weird game of multicultural influence and left-field design choices unseen in precedence and rarely imitated since. It's an eccentric play, as it is among the earliest platformers to contain character selection I've come across[20]. Vibrant middle eastern worlds populate the land of *Mario 2* in an

archetypically cultural fetishistic fashion. I have fond memories of playing this in its *Super Mario Advanced* form– a highly-marketed sprightly port of *Mario 2* seen in cart-filled treasure chests of layman GBA owners and handheld savants alike. The tranquil ease of it was welcome, then and now. As every single Mario fun-fact video loves to remind you, and I will not, *Mario 2* is figuratively not a Mario game. Its skeleton is *Yume Kōjō: Doki Doki Panic* wearing the Halloween garb of Princess Peach, Toad, Luigi, and Mr. Mario.

Yume Kōjō: Doki Doki Panic is the de facto piece of ephemeral trivia of algorithm sniffing, mouth-ajar navel-gazer. In fact, navel-gazing yet snuggly enjoyable podcast *Watch Out for Fireballs!* coined the term 'Doki Doki fact' to reference overwrought trivia regarding video games in reference to this overshared tidbit. Nonetheless, I saw it fit to play it through in its plumberless birthday suit. Loses a lot without the Mario skin, but all-but-the-same-game otherwise.

If *Super Mario 2* is some CBD oil and nighttime sleepy time tea, then *Super Mario 3* is a third dose of instant release Vyvanse promptly chased with a slug of Pepsi Max[21]. I, controversially, am not the biggest fan of *Mario 3* relative to its predecessors. Its brimming with creativity, it pushes the graphical and responsiveness of the Famicom to its absolute max, and its got a larger semblance of narrative and characterization via its in-world board-gamey map and continuity of items across levels. However, it does not quite have the pick-up and play quality the first two *Super Mario*'s do. It swung too far away from its arcadian roots. Frankly, I feel as though I'm missing something.

Castlevania rules – full stop. A gentleman's platformer; a cool-gothic twitchy action game. I downloaded the *Anniversary Collection* for my PlayStation to fully indulge in the franchise after playing most of the series' inaugural entry on WiiMednafen. Cursory research suggests the *CastleVania* fans are comparably insane to their Sonic counterparts. My playthrough was beyond rewarding and super difficult. A game not for children. Canonical.

From *Castlevania,* it's only fair I give a couple other Konami games a go. From the outset, the side scrolling shoot 'em up genre really is the genesis of the platformer. *Contra* is about as close to perfect as I've played so far.

I don't have the kindest words for the *Mega Man* games. They are obtuse, sticky, and slow. I tried a lot of other Capcom games, however, none of them are platformers though: *Final Fight*, *Street Fighter*, and *1941.*

Invoking *Super Mario* earlier was a categorical error – *STH1* was made with the purpose of competing with *Mario* in 16-bit rather than the neigh antiquated 8-bit of the NES and Master System.

Super Mario World is like *Super Mario 3*; a brilliant, challenging, smooth platformer so ripe with novelty and creative design that feels as if I've eaten an entire Tajima cow of Kobe beef - delicious, but my tummy hurts!

Furthermore… I reached into my past. Inevitable: movie-tie-ins. I suppose *Castle of Illusions* is a licensed ordeal. Hazeldine[22] chalks up SEGA's early success to their Disney games with a little editorial bite that suggests they are not necessarily of quality, but of brand value alone. My adolescent gaming was pervaded with THQ's inconsistent movie tie-in 3D platformers. None of which made much of an impression beyond the charismatic *Spongebob* games. *Castles of Illusions* has me wondering… wondering… wondering. Did these tie-ins too permeate the market of classic *STH*'s era? How many of them are platforms akin to the aforementioned? A quick google wasn't available circa '91. A glimmer of recognition could sell a game without the baggage of hive mind consensus. I look back to my thesis… something about lore? Whatever. Ragging on superheroes' pesky butterfly effect on contemporary populist art. That could be the place to start…

I digress: My anthropological fight with gaming year zero through to 1995ish will be incorporated in the text as I continue.

The common technique that got me through the above was my anachronistic use of save-states. I cheated my way through most of these games in the name of completionism. I am far from out of line, according to authorial intent, in arguing that the cruelty of early platformers is in the quarter gobbling ashes of arcade design along with the aforementioned panic regarding the rental market.

But I had to do it. Hands-on experience, the real deal, no modded Wii, no modded DS. There happens to be a throw-back arcade in my town with a few classics, so I decided to spend a free afternoon on my own messing with the cabinets at *Helley's Comet* between some film festival movies fuelled by Adderall, foggy melancholy and crippling conflicted anxiety regarding a a 'date' - if thats what it was, that was set to take place the following day. I had stumbled my way into a date with a class member – studying over coffee; sounds like date; might not be date; made me nervous either way I want to keep this a secret from Andrea. The date proved bookish. She was a worthwhile interlocutor and a gentlewoman. I was extremely parched during the date, which scrambled my normally impassioned disposition into something dorkier and less

strident than usual. We didn't study together again; our schedules are totally misaligned because of my stimulant abuse and late-night gaming/writing sessions and I felt guilty; like I had cheated even if the word 'date' was projected onto the encounter by me and never spoken aloud by the other party. The chances that I participate in any sort of physical intimacy while in love with Andrea circa February 2023, were extremely low unless a *Something Wild* type situation were to occur. So, I spent twelve dollars on credits at *Helley's*. I played *Marble Madness* and *Outrun* for the majority of my stay. I set a high-score on *Dig Dug* in one credit; it's just *Pac-Man* for babies. The only mascot platformer cabinet present at *Helley's* was *Ghosts n Goblins,* which I found to be a frustrating thought satisfying, with some of the same b-horror charm as *Castlevania,* though leaning more into the Hammer territory than the Lugosi swag of *Castlevania*. I liked the action-button projectiles but disliked the gravity of the jump – no real fluidity when hopping over tombstones. It smelled an awful lot like male Gen X ennui – an Indica dominant hybrid exemplified by my conception of Andrea's baby daddy.

In my Brian Wilson-esque depression, I lost the first two months of the year composing this section of the *Sonic 2* chapter while mostly ignoring other sections of my novel. Video games and literature took hold of my primary pass-times although my education's inundation of indulgently lengthy Victorian literature ate up most of my reading beyond the occasional trashy Romance novel and research material regarding video games. I revamped my previous parameters by adding in the complete classic *Sonic* epoch as my calendrical limit; meaning no games later than 1995[23]. I played far and wide outside the mascot platformer paradigm, and lost myself in anthropological gaming, often choosing not to scribble musings but instead play them sheerly for distractive fun. I wouldn't settle until I had played 100 games[24], most to completion, unless they were ambiguously concluded due to their archaic arcadian[25] gameplay or, on rare occasion, because they were simply downright insipid. I lost sight of my task at hand and didn't touch the Hog for the entirety of February. I tried my best to reject anything to do with Andrea and as I found it, ironically, intrusive and disruptive to the writing process. Of course, we talked once a week wherein I vengefully reclaimed her insidious conversational sidestepping which, afterwards, would temporarily spiral any internal progress towards, for lack of a better term, feeling alright. I had quit drinking, for god's sake. I should not be manic. I had a deadline to meet. Not an abstract one. Not a self-made one. JRPG's I could mindlessly grind became a nightly routine. It started as prep for the Sonic RPG, *Dark Brotherhood,* then became a survey of the genre to fashion a foreknowledge for a successful dive into the notably postmodernist approach to RPG gaming in the *Mother* series to boost the academic introduction you've already read which, in its final draft, makes no reference to the game, which then became a habit of

feeding myself a sensory smorgasbord of parasocial video game chat podcasts while levelling up instead of working through my current Shoeppheurian temperament under the guise of research which in of itself is a mask for being the perfect companion to Harrison. If I could speed run to the future….

Sonic 2 is exemplary of how to cement yourself as an immovable pillar of pop culture. It's brighter, faster, futuristic, and more efficient than its predecessor without changing the essential mechanics. *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* is not only a video game, a distinguished entry into the blue-blurs bottomless -ography of interactive media, but it is a great Sonic game; maybe the first *Sonic* game.

If we look at some of the most iconic levels in *STH2*, we'll be able to see how Naka and company fleshed out the tenants of the hedgehog.

Emerald Hill Zone isn't quite parody but a refined version of *"*what makes Sonic *Sonic"* - please, reader, notice the difference between Sonic and *Sonic*, with *italics*. Emerald Hill dials in the whole Sonic taxonomy. Its Green Hill, but perfect - not better - but perfect; it's the actualization of the idea. I contend that Sonic is a mix of horizontal speed and vertical exploration, with a subtle but invaluable emphasis on the latter, and, through distribution of rings and placement of save-points, its obvious that Emarald Hill is meant to tease the player for deciding the franchise is specifically one of these given polarities when, in reality, its both. Emerald Hill is abundantly north and east. There are secrets I can see, but, still, seven runs in, cannot reach, yet it still captures the same excitement as the Green Hill inauguration.

Monotony.

It's *actually Sonic 1*. *Sonic 2* is the Sonic game. *The Sonic Game*. THE SONIC GAME; at least in 2D.

Sonic the Hedgehog 2 (8-Bit)

On Treasure and the GameGear

I played *STH 8-Bit* by way of *Gems Collection* but found the emulation to be iffy at best, so I moved to the 3DS wherein I had installed the *Hshop*, a jailbroken Virtual E-Shop, and played the Virtual Console port. I, now well-seasoned, was still pulverized by it. The first boss in *STH2 8-Bit* is a precarious hand-eye challenge. A new and exclusive mechanic introduced in the second zone, Sky High Zone, conspired

against me. It felt like an odd reference to scroll shooters without the shooting, or the wackier levels in *Alex Kidd*, perhaps an experiment in incorporating flying gameplay into Sky Chase Zone in its 16-Bit counterpart; while I've placed this after *STH2,* the 8-Bit edition came first. Sky High Zone's paragliding is beholden to horrifically coded wind psychics, or intricately crafted wind physics if you are a real-deal paraglider – I wouldn't know. I'm not one for heights. The transgressing of Sonic's typical gameplay didn't feel cinematic or gimmicky or a nod to Tails' character traits as it did in Sky Chase. Tail's is essentially absent from this title other than intertitle artwork the opening cinematic shows Eggman kidnapping Mr. Miles leaves it safe to assume the goal of *STH2* is to save our fox friend, corroborated by the fourth page of the US manual, yet he appears in the pre-zone art as if he is accompanying Sonic. A lore headache.

Sky High reminded me of Treasure's *Dynamite Headdy*; a developer I grew rather obsessed with as inspired by the *Insert Credit Podcast*'s constant fawning over them. While marvelously quirky and high-spirited, *Headdy* frustrated me in its weirdness. Treasure's catalog, circa *Headdy*'s release, was hard enough with their characteristically single-credit arcadian style, but *Headdy* tripling-down on the kid-friendly cartoon aesthetics established in their straight-forward introductory platforming romp *McDonalds Adventure in Treasureland*, one would expect a joyously beatable experience. *Headdy* spirals out of control in its exponential difficulty curve, culminating in a frustrating scroll shooter level that led me to abandon it altogether. Treasure is notorious for genre hopping from on the ground-level beat em' up/run & guns to aerial combat. *Astro Boy: Omega Factor*, *Gunstar Heroes, Gunstar Super Heroes,* and *Headdy* all feature a jarring switch-up to aeronautical combat. *STH2 8-Bit* is guilty of misleading the player's mechanical comfort more than Treasure – Treasure's 90s oeuvre is characteristically offbeat, bouncy, and, arcadian in difficulty. I recall Tim Rogers refraining insistence that *Alien Soldier* is an alienating experiment in niche play. Sonic is Sonic and Sonic is for kids – that is, in part, what makes a Sonic game a *Sonic* game.

What, then, makes a Treasure game a *Treasure* game? As I became hyper-fixated on the Treasure oeuvre during the research process covered in the *STH 2* for Genesis, I am qualified to answer this question empirically through a brief written survey of their entire 16 bit catalog that will serve as a trial run on decisively cross-consulting the Sonic series in search of its core.

Gunstar Heroes

> Clever physics putting action-feel over high-performance. Idiosyncratic genre transgression. Eye-popping neon anime aesthetics. Odd mechanics: see the gun-power-combos. Faux-minimalism in its brevity encourages pick-up-and-play fun despite its quietly maximalist variety. Should Harrison be the retro-hesitant

zoomer I suspect he is, this is a sure-fire, not-cringe gateway. I tested out the two-player with Lee during a retro-barrage night using Nintendo Switch Online and he called gay and old before proceeding to fail to legally purchase a collection of *Metal Slug* which he touted as 'sick' and 'way less gay'.

McDonalds Treasureland Adventure:

A chunky, satisfyingly easy platformer. Does not feel as corporate as its advertainment nature suggests. Like *Gunstar*, it has peculiar itemization in its RPG-inspired money system and power-up inventory. Faux-cheap in its gossamer gloss despite its rich sense of all-ages accessible fun.

Dynamite Headdy

An attempt, near-satire, of the mascot platformer. Features disobedient variety in what the titular *Dynamite* can do by donning differing titular *Headdys*. Despite its candy-coated exterior, it is infamously hard to swallow. Its difficulty curve is, dare I say, ridonkulous. The level prior to my motivating-connector[26],Sky High, to this tangential survey of a cult developer is infamous amongst Treasure-heads[27] for its rigid pattern repetition and misleading never-ending tower climb. Treasure shows their ass. *Headdy*'s lights flicker in unfinished, unpolished alienation, yet not without extraordinary charm in glimmering audacity and auteurmanship. *Headdy* has the gravitas, the physicality, missing in the oft-hackney mascot platform, but has the weighty oracular hindrance of credit-based gameplay of its quarter-chomping forefathers. *Ristar*, released a year later for Genesis, is produced by Hiroshi Oso, the director of *Headdy*. Oso, I imagine, took what *Headdy* attempts – be weird and 90s and colourful and franchisable and unique – and taught the *Ristar* team to use thistledown mainstream grace compared to *Headdy* coarse obscurity. However, *Headdy* is infinitely more riveting than *Ristar* because its wicked hard (at times) and calls to the 20th century western fascination with so-called 'urban' culture whilst holding fort with the sugary Saturday morning cartoons of Sonic, Ristar, and the mascot-likes.

Alien Soldier

Spiritually, *Alien Soldier* is *Gunstar* on a well-adhered-to Atkins diet of billion-credit arcade sessions and door-stopper dystopian science fiction.

Further, I ask, what makes a GameGear game a *GameGear* game? I sit before the second of four entries with no empirical experience with the console that holds half of the series as it stands, circa November 1992[28]. I'd say: Screen-crunched ports, tie-in games, a wholly American feel, glistening, perfect 8-bit graphics, bad hit boxes, tech-y

platforming and unplayable shoot em' ups, and clunky but novel design is what makes a GameGear game a GameGear game.

Sonic Chaos

On 1993

I am now a certifiable pundit of 90s platforming games – "thoughts on *Sonic Chaos*?" you can ask me now and I can answer assuredly "It's a game for babies. It's a game for big diapey babies" I say with a smug Donald Trump grin. Wikipedia claims this is a closer analog to *STH2* 16-Bit than its 8-Bit counterpart, but they're off base. *STH2* expects the player to be well-versed in Sonicisms, as does the 8-bit game, but *Sonic Chaos* supposes that you're a little child dipping their feet into the shallow end of a burgeoning super-franchise. SEGA knows Grandma bought you a GameGear for Christmas… 'but I asked for a GameBoy' you think to yourself. You're too polite, young man, and Grandma is too generous, so you swallow your pride and accept the battery-guzzling tank-sized SEGA handheld as it stands before you. It came with *STH 8-Bit*, and you didn't mind it at all. It's 1993 – that would make you eleven years older than I am in the current year. You save up your money and buy the most recent Sonic game. It's called *Sonic Chaos*. You think it's cool because it's the first 'new' Sonic game on the GameGear, at least according to its unique titling format. No numbers. Just Chaos. You know a lot about video games now because you've bonded with husky optically challenged schoolmates who don't think its 'gay' that you've become a SEGA kid – although that Nelson Muntz wannabee can't help suggesting that the GameGear would fit right-good in your asshole. Foreign, untouchable Japanese video games become objects of curious desire as a result of *Electronic Gaming Monthly* magazines you and your friends flip through after-school. I pray it's *EGM* and not *GamePro*. The *Sonic Chaos* review in *GamePro* issue #55, written by another pseudonym author 'The Unknown Gamer', he calls himself, continues *GamePro*'s streak of simply describing the game in vacant brevity. You and your Poindexter friends are visited by a time-travelling gaming guru. It's me. He, or I, hand you region-free copies of *Zool: Ninja of the Nth Dimension*[29] before letting you and your buddies know that you'll all work for Google at the exact right time and take stock options that will give you lee-way to start your own independent game development company that will, with hard work, dedication and ample soul, rival Valve in terms of quality, cultural capital, and profit alike. You thank me, and I'll ask you to name your top five Sonic games – the same way one may ask a girl in a Sonic Youth shirt her top five Sonic Youth albums. Mine are Daydream Nation, Goo, Washing Machine, Confusion is Sex, and Murray Street, although I appreciate their

entire body of work. Great band with a rich discography. You'll tell me you've only played the Genesis games at your friend's house while pointing at said friend in the group. I'll then ask him his top five Sonic games. He'll say "Sonic 2. Sonic 1. Sonic Chaos. Sonic 2 for the GameGear, then Sonic 1 for the GameGear". I'll think that that isn't a terrible ranking, but quietly think your friend is bitch-made because those first two GameGear Sonics are more eccentric than the milquetoast *Sonic Chaos*. Plus, *Sonic CD* came out the same week as *Chaos* in North America, and I forgive you for having not bought the SEGA-CD; I haven't played any CD games besides *Sonic*. But I hold my tongue, and ask the group if they had any thoughts on Mecha Green Hill Zone. They go quiet, like the jocks do during math class. I'll tell them the only redeeming quality of *Sonic Chaos* is the second act of Mecha Green Hill. I'll tell them it's the first time since Marble Zone that the series really tried to be a platforming game. Then, I'll suggest that's why it is not a great Sonic game. Sonic isn't about carefully plotted jumping, twitchy movement, and rinse-lather-repeat memorization. It's a tug of war between vertical exploration and horizontal time trials. I'll make sure you see the clever but half-baked beauty of Sleeping Egg zone's glitchy gobbledygook super spin attack brick-bashing that gives it that mangy tactile feel I've learned to love in cheap 8-bit video games – its crunchy, I tell you, like grandma's peanut brittle. You comment that "my grandma doesn't make peanut brittle" and I'll survey the other three lads for their grandmother's baking of choice. One of them will say "actually, yeah, my grandma has made peanut brittle before". I'll say "you get it then" pause and then ask "was it any good?". He'll say "it hurt my teef" (he says teef because he's a nerd with braces). I'll use a mnemonics device, – or a crass play-on-word – 'penis brittle', to remind myself to learn how to make some when I return to the present. I've never made it before, nor have I tasted any since I was in high-school. I recall my estranged friend Griffin's parents made some at Christmas once. You'll nod your heads politely, as I disparage the Aqua Planet Zone as "too easy to be a shitty water level". Then, after I lecture them on Yuji Hori's bravery in spending most of *DQ2*'s runtime on water as a connective-tangent about the use of water in 8-bit video games, culminating in ruminations on soothing pleasure of boating to-and-fro across Torland compared to the snail-pace sluggishness of Sonic and Mario's underwater areas, I'll pull *Sonic Chaos* out of your GameGear, toss aside, and suggest you wait until *Triple Trouble* comes out next holiday season. As I'm preparing to go back to 2023, your chubbiest friend will ask if I've ever seen a pair of boobs. I'll tell him, firmly, that yes, I've seen a number of boobs, not as many as I'd like to, in fact, I'm a bit self-conscious about my the number given my age. I'll add that I've seen vaginas too. He asks me how? I tell them about my first time. I was propositioned by a girl a few years older than me from high school. She called herself a radical third-wave feminist[30]. I wore a Wu-Tang shirt that day – the Ghostface Killah mask. I lost that shirt in a mosh pit during a Deafheaven concert a year later. I'll

ask if any of you have seen *Porky's* - an iconic Canadian sex comedy - before telling them it's only Canadian because the director, Bob Clark, one of Canada's 'great directors' mostly known for the aforementioned *Porky's* and cult-horror *Black Christmas* and atrociously hilarious Simon Rex vehicle *Karate Dog* was an American ex-pat trying to dodge Hollywood taxes. I tell your chunky friend that I knew how to eat pussy before actually eating pussy, because I watched a lot of lesbian porn as a teenager. Remembering its 1993, I recommend some magazines and Nina Hartley tapes. I ask them if Princess Diana is dead yet. They tell me they aren't sure who that is; right, they are not gay twenty-somethings in 1993, nor are they British; they are rotund acne-ridden teenagers. I reach into my pocket and pull out my iPhone to check when she died – no signal. It's 1993… I ask them if goth girls are a thing yet. Yes, they are pretty sure that they are. I tell them to go to weird underground shows and talk to those girls. I recommend they pursue experienced older women, especially of the alternative and/or gothic variety, because they know what they like, and will help you achieve the same actualization. I suggest that alternative women, people, are more open-minded and will not subjugate them to the societal beauty standards present in their public school life. If you are clean, good, and kind to them, they will be patient with your inexperience. I back-track, saying this is such a generalization, and not really something I ever experienced. I tell the big-boned boy that I only got laid after losing sixty pounds and getting a six-pack in eleventh grade. I try to say this kindly, without contempt towards his current form. I don't tell him about the body-positivity movement that may benefit him sans weight-loss because he'll be 37 by the time it reaches the current year. I don't tell him that Adderall was a great aid in my journey, albeit an unintentional one. I suggest that Sonic Youth is an excellent gateway to more esoteric music. Sonic Youth. I find myself glowing. Mentoring these young men elates me. I anticipate my future role in Harrison's life. I text Andrea "I miss you". The text goes green, with a little red exclamation point next to it. It's still 1993 — I forgot. It is time to go back. I wish the boys a fond farewell.

Dr. Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine

On Puyo Puyo

Ranked amongst my favorite games thus far is *Puyo Puyo 2*, not just for its addictive falling block puzzle fun, but because of its brilliant echo of Eiji Ōtsuka's "Theory of Narrative Consumption". In *Puyo Puyo 2*, characterization bolsters a nearly flawless take on the *Dr Mario* gameplay. It is framed around a protagonist Arle Nadja, who resembles Sakura from *Cardcaptors* and originates from developer Compile's

Madou Monogatari for the MSX. Admittedly, the *Maodu Monogatari* series is a Japan only affair, and only sparse entries have been fan-translated over the years, so some of the succeeding thesis is based upon my regionality. Regardless, *Puyo Puyo 2* exemplifies characterization as a reward. In my youth, I loved fighting games with myriad unlockable characters. The revelation that Mewtwo was in *Smash Brothers Melee*, suddenly, out of nowhere - the requirement to unlock Mewtwo is to play a total of 20 hours in VS. mode or play 700 VS. matches - sparked such joy. While *Puyo Puyo 2* doesn't have unlockable characters, it slowly introduces new enemies as you progress through its story mode; each with their own distinct characterization and dialogue, which I cannot read as even its eventual American release on the Neo Geo Pocket remains untranslated. The better you are at *Puyo*, the more of its world you are exposed to. I recall a friend remarking that they were addicted to *The Simpsons: Tapped Out* mobile game, not because of its gameplay, but because it had unique dialogue from characters she loved from the series that one would reveal as they progressed. Abstractly, this was my experience with *Puyo Puyo 2* - finding joy in working through what character designer Aya Shimazaki had to offer.

Dr Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine is a reskin and American introduction to the first *Puyo Puyo*. It is decidedly not canon, as I recognize its art and humor from the *Adventures of Sonic the Hedgehog* cartoon series. It offers the same characterized reward as *Puyo Puyo 2*, wherein with each level a new foe with a new bit of dialogue is introduced, however, its 16-bit faux-3D design and largely Americanized aesthetics alongside the generic bad-guy one-liners leave much to be desired in contrast to *Puyo Puyo 2*'s inviting Anime characterization; nonetheless, this is peak of the 2D era and its art is as vibrant and polished as the best of the SNES & Genesis. *Mean Bean Machine* is great because it's a *Puyo* game, and not because it elaborates and humanizes Eggman - much like the *Puyo* games, it just deletes time. I got myself a Powkiddy RGB10X to play games with a bit more oomf than the 3DS, and this thing just erases bus rides far more than the turn-based RPGs I usually play handheld. For that, I proudly champion *Mean Bean Machine*.

Sonic Triple Trouble

On the Monotony of a Good game similar to other good games

It only took me a month of retro-gaming to become accustomed to the pace of the 16-Bit era. The arcadian format I once lamented is now a net benefit. Most platforming games, not all, are quite easy and short, often shorter than a film. *Triple*

Trouble and *Chaos* took me just around seventy minutes on first play-through, mostly thanks to their forgiving 'continue' system. *Triple Trouble*, simply, is *Chaos*, but with all the imperfections and clunk scrapped off.

Sonic the Hedgehog 3

On Murakami

I have not addressed the music of classic *Sonic*, outside of the tasty Bridge-mix Zone tune, so, if I have retained your patience up to now, I will do so posthaste.

An eighteen-year-old co-worker of mine offhandedly suggested that reading Haruki Murakami was a red-flag in men and a sign of an artistically inclined male manipulator. It brought back memories of a parlance I had with a cultured young man a number of times, stemming from the tired compliment "nice-shirt" regarding his *Plantasia* tee, when I was working alone at the boutique liquor store. Once, he had asked me about my open copy of *Dubliners* on a slow evening, and picked my brain about literature. He talked at length about Murakami's forlorn romanticism which struck me as a woefully self-involved and youthfully naive reading of Murakami's themes that supports my co-worker ego-centric male manipulator proclamations. Assuredly, Murakami is guilty of manic-pixie-dream-girling the women of his novels, and so am I, but that does not diminish the rare lucidity of his awesome postmodern style; one echoed so beautifully in Murakami peer Shigesato Itoi's *Mother* series. My teenaged coworker and the discourse that begets her criticism strikes me as ad hominem and extemporaneous – not unlike my ill will towards the mouth-breathing conceitedness of SonicTubers. She has repeatedly used my Murakami fandom as a cheeky ironic dismissal of my proclivities, to which we enter the cycle of me asking if she had read Murakami; and naturally, she has not. The zeitgeist once again begets the zeitgeist's provenance.

Around the time of my first encounter with Murakami – as a young adult male in the throes of his cardinal break-up (it was the aforementioned *Norwegian Wood*) – my father gave me his copy of *What I Think About When I Think About Running.* In my youth, I pursued cross-country and long-distance running, but repeatedly fell into the trappings of seed oil, alcohol, and bridge mix, much to the chagrin of my dearest, most expedient hedgehog. I never read Murkami's running book, nor is the book on my shelf, as far as I could see. It was a rather diminutive edition so it may be concealed between unread door stoppers. The audiobook, however, is free with my Audible subscription saving the expulsion of my allotted monthly credit. I listened to Murkami's devotional

running memoir during my third complete play-through of *Sonic 3*, and finished the last hour while pecking away at *Bonk's Adventure* over a late Saturday night of not reading *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

Murakami is not only fascinated with running, but, as any of the male manipulators in the room are surely aware of, music as well. Rock, particularly Beck, Gorillaz, and Eric Clapton, are Haruki's suggested running music, while I prefer audiobooks or podcasts as it allows the mind, body, and soul to develop in concert. Nonetheless, it dawned on me that isolating the classic Sonic score from its source and reappropriating it as a soundtrack to renewed cardiovascular activity would prove to be more substantive for my writing beyond the amusingly garrulous aside that Murakami and Sonic are both Japanese and both avid runners. Free of the lethargy of alcoholism, I ran.

During my first run, I heard a bit of Michael Jackson in the music, sure, but my mind drifted elsewhere - how much I'd rather this kid been obsessed with *Dragon Quest*, a particular girl in my class and how much I liked her voice, Bari Weiss and how smug she is; how deeply partisan her so-called *Free Press* is, 'autodiadicism' vs. traditional schooling; how the former is more effective at retaining knowledge but harder to commit to, how I'd never seen a James Dean movie, black metal and its inherent appeal to transgender people and racists; makes sense, its transformative and radical and antiestablishment; drinking. It'd been a few months since I drank. I wondered how much running might offset a return to drink. *Homestuck*; I should give it a read; I'd bet it's aged-well. I thought about this gaming deep-dive and how much it has rejiggered my bias in favor of certain subcultural niches like *Steven Universe*, *Undertale*, *My Little Pony*, *Warrior Cats, Supernatural, Doctor Who* and *Sherlock*. I wanted to be a part of it all. I thought about how Jonathan Franzen doled out music references in *Freedom* - Wilco, Pearl Jam, Magazine, Madonna, Eminem, and Bright Eyes, to name a few. Sometimes, critics don't take too kindly to an on-slaught of pop culture references, but I thought it grounded *Freedom* in a certain NPR-ish cultural context that it belongs in, then I thought of *Ready Player One* - I hated the movie so much I read the book - and how that's a real awful use of pop culture references; not just nostalgic vanity but free of meaning beyond DiCaprio in *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* reaction gif recognition. Finally, I thought about *Sonic 3 & Knuckles*.

Sonic 3 is much more *Sonic 3* than *Sonic 2* is a sequel to *Sonic. Sonic 3*, in contrast to *Mario's* third outing, is not a stand-alone game. Whereas *Sonic 2* is a vast improvement on *Sonic 1*'s disjointed pacing and arcadian growing pains, *Sonic 3* is an abundant, lavish, high-definition, high-budget successor to a popular game. The characterization is manifold - there's environmental storytelling suggesting continuity, there are sprites conveying multitudinous emotions that differ between Sonic, Tails (although Tails takes

quite a backseat in this entry), and Knuckles; Knuckle's chuckle[31] in Carnival Night zone, for example, conveys his now-famous gullibility and accidental villainous streak further rewarding the *& Knuckles* section through stark characterization. For the first time, the virtuoso level design works in harmony with overarching game design; the Ice Cap zone feels like an ice cap zone. It's cinematic, overflowing with ideas, and an engrossing blast - but - I must confess, its grandiose, AAA feel diminishes the pick-up-and-play satisfaction present in *Sonic 2*.

Sonic Drift

On the song "A Real Hero" by Electric Youth as made popular by Nicholas Winding Refn's Drive is about Captain Sully. Sully, directed by Clint Eastwood, is a very effective work of populist cinema that I would highly recommend you watch on a quiet weeknight

"Buddy, you can't get girls if you don't have a car" said AJ talking with Kenny – two cooks at *The Town*.

I interjected "Man, I don't even drive. I do just fine".

"Listen, my bro, what if she wants to just *go.* Like, a trip, man"

My first serious adult girlfriend, contemporaneous to the above exchange, drove a Mazda 3. I bore the brunt of being licenseless the entirety of my relationship — a synecdoche for the reason behind our demise. The optimist in me hopes that a romantic partner would be able to look past such a petty grievance, but the pragmatist in me understands automobile orthodoxy. AJ is right, and so am I. I've done fine without one, but I'd have done much better with it. My history teacher in eleventh grade described driving as the truest form of freedom, because you could fuck in the back of your car, he said in not so many words. He, as Robert Redford wannabe cool as he was, was far too close to the female students, and would have them over for dinner, and, as I've uncovered by working with people 10 years my junior at the *Cinema Center*, continues this practice. His blogspot, now defunct, featured a plethora of nude paintings in the stylings of someone who's fucked teens. No, I shouldn't assume. No allegations have surfaced, not yet. Rumor has it that he was a 'cafeteria mormon', if there is such a thing. I saw him on the street about seven years ago, I said "hey, man, I was in your history class" and he pretended to remember, and I went about my day. I doubt he knows there are eleven Sonic racing games. A hedgehog named after the speed of sound has had eleven vehicle outings. Don't add up to me. What's the lore. What about the lore!? We have just begun to scratch the narratological itch with *STH3*. The lore is falling apart.

But what do I know about racing? I'm not entitled to an opinion. Not yet because I do not drive. Driving is so tactile and feel-oriented that my voyeuristic theoretical approach to culture is made moot. Do I have to learn to drive to speak on *Sonic Drift*? Am I going to have a crash course on the racing game genre? No. Fuck that. Preventing categorical errors by monomaniacally crusading upon a genre is surely a cheap gimmick by now. Like the SpongeBob episode where he rips his pants for the entertainment of others only to end up embarrassing himself with the performances' diminished returns. I have a learner's permit. Never used it. That'll do. What about the lore!!?? Why is Sonic in a race car?????!!??

"Hey guys, I'm Sonic. Today I'm going to compete with my car instead of my legs. Well, whether I run with my legs or my car, I'll probably win!" says Sonic in the Japanese prologue[32]. This is game-lore character development: cocky Sonic. He's competitive. He understands speed, so, thus, he understands it in multiple domains, or so he thinks.

Sonic Drift is not particularly fun, and rather nonsensical as a handheld game for a genre defined by its multiplayer capacities. However, its title is ostensibly astute. Drifting is everything to a successful play through of its Chaos GP mode. From my Sarcastic Gamer days, I learned that drifting was a memetic 'deep tech' (short for technique) of *Mario Kart: Double Dash,* as I learned through hands-on stick-shifting in the arcade playing SEGA's (or Yu Suzuki's) iconic second generation racing gameography: *OutRun*, *Power Drift*, *After Burner*, and *Virtua Racing*. Perhaps, I'll have more to say about *Drift 2* shortly.

Tails' Skypatrol

On Shmups, with reference to Knuckles Chaotix

Downtown, there's this bar called Saint Frankie's; it's this Human Resources approved version of a Metal bar. I've heard Social Distortion, Soundgarden, and Cloud Nothings, but not a lick of Metallica, not even "Enter the Sandman". We don't have a 'real' metal bar here, but I've been to a few in Vancouver. One in particular, *Moose*, serves far past the provincial liquor laws allow while the waitresses openly snort coke at the bar as a mix of Gorguts and Iron Maiden blare above speaking volume as I eat the worst chicken wings ever made over a shot of Jack and a beer. It's as uninviting as it is inviting. Frankie's, on the other hand, serves overpriced hotdogs, and has a barbershop in the back; it, however, have arcade tabletops running a solid little MAME set-up.

I've broken my sobriety streak recently, and started spending the occasional half hour there on my days off during happy hour for the cheap Micheladas. I enjoy admiring their waitresses ghastly colored tattoos and playing shmups with a joystick. They have a nice early retrospective on there - *Space Invaders, 1942, Xevious, Donkey Kong 3,* and *Zanac*. At home, *Xevious* was exceptional - it's punchy as heck, has the atmosphere of 50s UFO movie, and plays with an inviting pattern for memorization, whereas the more generous, slower pace *1942* paired well with beer and Clamato, and 'hard rock'. I wanted to get my head around the shmup because of those aforementioned Treasure games; they all owed so much the shoot em' up genre; even some of their later games (*Ikuraga* and *Radiant Silvergun*) were straight-ahead vertical shooter that brought upon a renaissance and the Bullet Hell genre we recognize from popular mobile games like *Vampire Survivors* today, although I've yet to play them; I'm still fighting with *Alien Solider*.

Through my research, I uncovered a site called *Shmuplations* - a portmanteau of Shoot Em' Ups and translations - that's a repository for unearthed interviews with Japanese game developers. Additionally, I love reading a still-active forum simply called *shmups*. Both these places served as harbingers of interest in the genre; their fervor, their knowledge, and their taste inside-and-out of the genre strayed far from the typical IGN list. I garnered much insight into the early console years from playing their recommendations. I imagine a certain beard waxed Millennial/Gen-X cusper would show a girl a terrible time here by owning them at *Galaga.*

The Shoot Em' Up genre is a finicky catch-all - it's an all-encompassing term referring to both horizontal and side-scrolling shooters, the latter of which entitles more characterization and platforming as its visual imposition allows for ground-level combat. Shmups, regardless of orientation, are like a bronze statue of Verne Troyer - short and hard. I assume their fandom is so passionate because of the deeply replayable challenge at its core; one where the arcadian point systems genuinely demarcate one's ability, in contrast to a *Final Fight* brawler wherein defeating a swath of enemies is the primary reward and points are secondary.

In the 90s, it seemed the horizontal approach better translated to the console generation as its cohort had cut their teeth on the left-to-right movement of Mario, yet many-a-game still stuck with the aerial theme. That's not to say the horizontal form originated with console generation, but that I, personally, believe *Xevious* plays better in an arcade than *Darius* does on a console. Mega-hits like *R-Type* and *Gradius* translate to a D-pad because of their positionality, whereas their vertical peers shine with the joystick as it stands like a pilot's flightstick moving multi-directional from a first-person perspective.

It's no surprise, then, that Japan System House (with help from SEGA) decided to superimpose their nine-tailed pilot on the horizontal shmup genre.

Before even getting my pilot gloves dirty with *Tails Skypatrol*, I knew it was a foolish outing. Every Sonic game thus far has proven to be duck soup compared to *R-Type*, and Tails is Sonic's most Chibi pal (thus far); no platformer kid wants to weed through the ruff terrain of shmup.

Tails Skypatrol was produced by Japan System House, best known for producing a handful of GameGear ports and demakes of popular SEGA titles. According to some beta footage, Tails was originally set to rub elbows with Disney characters, backed up by JSH programmer Alice Kagamino anecdotes about it on Twitter.

Tails Skypatrol, despite my intro, is not so much a shmup as it is as it is an attempt to find a gameplay gimmick that sets itself apart from the overrun mascot platformer marketplace. *Chaotix*, released only one week before *Skypatrol* in Japan, implemented a similar gimmick - using a magical "Boomerring" (as it's named in the manual) as a weapon, a grappling hook, and a means of interacting with the world. Unlike *Chaotix*, which firmly lands in the platforming genre, *Skypatrol* is more of an action game with the movement of a horizontal, autoscrolling shmup. Unlike Mario, the Sonic franchise used its popularity to experiment with form - whether it be the time-travel of *CD*, the tug-of-war physics of *Chaotix*, or the scmup-y nature of *Skypatrol*. To my surprise, *Tails Skypatrol* is quite a pleasant little play through, despite its wavering hit box, misleading environmental obstacles, and the screen crunch inevitable in a handheld game. If anything, this is a short, technique-oriented, game best suited for speed-runners and arcadeheads.

Largely, the reception to *Tails Skypatrol* is a byproduct of "Genre Troubles", as defined by University of Waterloo professor Gerald Vorhees - akin to the categorical errors I discussed in the *STH2* chapter. Vorhee's essay takes aim at the Game Studies area of academia, but much of his critiques of video game genre stand to the larger body of gamers and games writers. In Vorhees case, the ludology and narratology debates cause much of the genre troubles in games discourse; a horror game being a narratological genre and a shmup being a ludological one, although Vorhee's preoccupations are broader, socio-political, and focused on the specificity of games writing rather than a multidisciplinary approach. *Tails Skypatrol* fails, to some, because it's uncategorizable despite its familiar genre traits. It's important to review it with genre traits in mind: mascot, shmup, Sonic, Game Gear, and Chibi aesthetic, but it's equally insightful to approach it from an 'agnostic' place, as Vorhees calls it, wherein one steps back and evaluates it as it is: a clunky novelty brimming with intentional design. *Skypatrol*

Considering it narratively, *Tails Skypatrol* sits somewhere between *Sonic 1* and *Sonic 3*, from what I can infer from the Japanese and English manuals. Sonic, Eggman, and the Flickys are absent from this one, and as a game in-and-of-itself, it appears that Tails stumbles into a weird island and is antagonized by an evil witch. It serves only to flesh out Tails: he's capable alone, and loves Mint candies.

Sonic Labyrinth

On Speedrunning

The *Origin* port of *Sonic Labyrinth* is a broken mess, yet I found myself snorting fat lines of *Sonic Labyrinth* late one night over a lukewarm glass of Diet Dr. Pepper. The Gymnastics unit of gym class, in the grade school days preceding the varsity gendered apartheid of masculine rough sport and feminine delicate sport, gives us time to play in the ticklish labyrinth of calisthenic competition. *Labyrinth* brings to mind those days gone. Sonic's defining speed is aroused in the burgeoning isometrica of this sticky *Marble Madness* redux[33]. Reducing the word salad to just the greens: *Sonic Labyrinth* is pretty comfy. Not in the comfy world-built escapism of *Dragon Quest*, but an instance of a breezy kick-back, say, watching *Little Nicky* with your buddies on a weekday. In its ergonomic simplicity, it begs for mastery – speedrunning.

We've yet to address the subject – We've talked running and boy, have we ever talked speed[34]. The Speedrun is the truest sportification of video games. The competitive game, whether racing, fighting, sport, shooting or otherwise, makes for true sport. However, video games otherwise are not reliant on a partner or a team, as most sports are. In my youth, I became infatuated with mastering the *Mirror's Edge* demo circa its initial release that makes me understand the twitchy impulse to shave nanoseconds off another speedy playthrough. Speedruns make the single player game a competitive enterprise and has grown into popular fodder for YouTube documentarians. The genre even has its first auteur: the synthwave cliffhanger master SummoningSalt. Yet, Sonic's speed running scene is not as prominent as Mario's. I've implored myself to survey and consult the diminutive *Sonic Labyrinth* scene as the simple arcade style gameplay and short runtime suggests it would be a delightfully ripe fruit for a Speedrun pie. None of the *Sonic Labyrinth* runners, nor *Tails Skypatrol*, got back to me. Perhaps, I shouldn't have told them "I might self-publish a book about Sonic on Amazon; there's a lot of sex in it, though I might tone it down a bit, and I didn't take the vaccine. If that's cool with you, I'd love to interview you".

Sonic Blast

On 1996

Sonic Blast is the worst the franchise has to offer. While clunky games like *Labyrinth* and *Skypatrol* at least offer some novelty and hidden depth, *Blast* is the Hog equivalent to a THQ tie-in game at its most half-assed. Capitalizing on trendy prerendered visuals made popular by the *Donkey Kong Country* trilogy - a brilliant swan-song to 2D platformers and a novelty departure from the Mario formula - *Blast* is a finicky, bad-faith vie to keep the *Sonic* brand alive as the Sonic Team fails to produce a meaningful game for the fifth-generation console era.

Sonic Blast's biggest blemish is its water level; it's already slow and sticky, but the physics puzzles on Blue Marine Zone are enough to drive a grown man wild. I traveled back to 1996 and checked in on the boys. They were a little older, with awkward baritone voices. I asked them if they got Sonic Blast; they didn't even know it was out, and were confused when I said it was a GameGear game. They told me they got N64s and PlayStations last year, for Christmas. I asked them what games they've tried, they told me Tekken was the 'shit' - they swear now. I told them I hadn't played any PlayStation games since I was a kid. The chubby one, who started to have a bit of peach fuzz, offered me further suggestions: Twisted Metal, Destruction Derby, and Rayman, especially if I liked Sonic so much. They told me they'd go over to the big guy's dads house and play PlayStation all the time. I loved the camaraderie these boys had retained these past two years. I wished, aloud, that I had someone to play games with. I asked how he afforded all those games, and he said his parents got divorced, and his dad would buy him anything. I asked if he got the 32x, and he said there weren't really any games he wanted to play. I understood. I asked them if they took any of my advice from a couple of years ago. They said they didn't, really, because Princess Diana was still alive. I guess they went and learned who she was. I said, trust me, she does, then one of the weirder ones told me they stole a Nina Hartley video from the curtained-off section in Blockbuster. I said "right on", and didn't really want to hear about a sleepover jerk-off session they would later come to repress. I asked if they had ever played any of the Final Fantasy games, and one of them said he had played Final Fantasy III, and I told him that it was actually the sixth game in Japan. He said he knew that, he reads Nintendo Power. I asked him if he liked it, and he said it was amazing. I told him that, next year, Final Fantasy VII will be a huge hit and popularize JRPGs in the west. He asked me

what it was like, and I said “honestly, I downloaded it on Steam, and navigating a 3D world with that top-down perspective wasn't really enjoyable, but that the story and atmosphere seemed to be supremely fleshed out and modern” then I paused and added “I think it will blow your mind; thought, I didn’t get very far into it. Maybe one day”. He said he was stoked, and asked when it was coming out. I told him “September 1997”. He said that was a long time away, and I told him time is relative to your age. He shrugged. I asked how school was, and they said it was ‘gay’. I said “word” and left.

Sonic 3D Blast

On what could’ve been

1. Final Fantasy VI
2. Dragon Quest V
3. Gunstar Heroes
4. Dragon Quest IV
5. Chrono Trigger
6. Final Fantasy V
7. Final Fantasy IV
8. Puyo Puyo 2
9. Contra
10. Mother
11. Marble Madness
12. Qix
13. Super Breakout
14. Sonic the Hedgehog 2
15. Castlevania
16. Lufia II
17. Super Mario 2
18. Final Fight
19. Landstalker
20. Ninja Gaiden
21. Dragon Quest III
22. Sonic the Hedgehog 3
23. Super Mario
24. Xevious
25. Sonic the Hedgehog

26. Psycho Dream
27. Q-Bert
28. Tails Skypatrol
29. Elevator Action
30. Sunset Riders
31. Shinobi
32. Final Fantasy III
33. McDonald's Treasure Land Adventure
34. Alien Syndrome
35. Super Mario 3
36. Donkey Kong Country
37. Sonic CD
38. Uforia: The Saga
39. Flicky
40. Ys

Sonic 3D Blast is an infamous rush job; they had nothing for the Saturn ready, so they slapped together this measly isometric tech demo of game, and put their eggs in the far superior *NiGhts* basket until *Adventure* was ready to hard-boil on Dreamcast. However, despite how unintuitive a fast, jumpy hedgehog in a Landstalkerian landscape may sound, the team did what they could and presented something cute, almost charmingly mediocre that does not quite deserve the hatred it receives. I fondly recall my single play-through of *3D Blast*, even if I never chose to return it ever again. *NiGhts*, on the otherhand, is even more of tech-demo, yet, a spectacular one. Much of my thought during these process was towards shocking myself with the transition to *3D;* and *NiGhts* presents a counterpoint to what three-dimensional gaming could've been; this mystical cylindric sense of exploration and flotation as opposed to the POV once-removed made standard by *Mario 64;* whereas the prerendered isometrica of *3D* blast presents something that just never was ever going to go anywhere in the platforming modality – it works in an action-adventure Zeldian context like *Light Crusader* (which only fails because its too big-for-its-britches and just a little too unforgiving with the health bar). Anyhow, there is 100000 YouTube videos explaining the first 'dark ages' of Sonic during the Saturn era that makes any of my points moot, other than the alternative timeline in which *NiGhts's* novel 3D style could've taken off and been explored in less arcade-y contexts.

Sonic Jam

On Saturn

I was jarred by *Sonic Adventure* after jumping in immediately following *3D Blast*. I admit, I was dishonest in my preceding sections: I played the game chronologically straight through in ten days. Thus, I decided to pause my relentless war of attrition against the classic games, and do what I did in the *STH2* chapter, before continuing onwards. I was so taken aback by the shift in modality, despite my inherent familiarity with *Adventure*, that I devised the nonsense I had to first spend months in three dimensions realm before I could be qualified enough to tackle the platformer genre's transition into 3D, then do the same with early 64-bit games prior to the release of *Sonic Adventure* on the SEGA Dreamcast in 1999, as well as address the absence of mainline Sonic from 1996-1999 in a "The first Dark Ages of Sonic" chapter.

The *Insert Credit* podcast and their highly intelligent Japanophile forums made me privy to the vulgar auteurism[35] of the SEGA Saturn. I was compelled to have a real-deal Saturn. A collector's item, maybe, or, out of my growing respect for the weirdness of SEGA's fledgling days. The Saturn has proven something of a Shyamalan plot-twist to my Sonic story. Alice (me) has tumbled deep enough down the retro-gaming rabbit role to realize the SEGA Genesis she (he) played in the Tulgey Woods (PrimeMusic) was not a SEGA Genesis at all… it was Saturn playing the *Sonic Jam* port of *STH1*.

I got back to *Sonic Adventure* eventually, but it still say uneasy with me; maybe, it was too nostalgic; this is where I cut my teeth. One of my earliest memories was playing it back in Winnipeg at my next-door neighbor's house and being blown away by the whale-chase in Emerald Zone. My innocence still intact. My mind malleable enough to feel real wonder. I got wonder out of love, sometimes, still, but not from *Adventure*, not like I used to; I got it from *Final Fantasy VI* too.

I called Andrea with a controller in my hand, and the character select screen open on ROM of *Sonic Adventure DX* open; the industrial tinged J-rock menu humming lightly in the background. I told her I was at an impasse. I was just a dumb kid, really, who was playing video games and trying his best to grow up; who hadn't grown up; who couldn't be what she really needed him to be. She asked if I had met someone else. I said, yes, sort of, but nothing's happened yet. I am not above a wandering eye – suffering from Mulvey's male gaze in the cinema of my day-to-day life. I hold fort that my leer is not of a predatory predilection. I, however, admit to the unafraid beholding of my subjective lens image of IRL beauty. As a student, I've found myself developing objects of attraction in the classroom; usually without the awkward pining created by the parasociality of Tinder or the anxiety caused by the looming Harrison. In other words, I

am free to be at my most unself-conscious; I've since been told this gives off "girlfriend vibes" or seem "taken". At my previous juncture, the 'man betrothed to become the caregiver of his wayward lover's teenaged child', I would not be able to cleanly explain my relationship status – Zuckerberg's infamous "It's Complicated" describes my predicament best. This gave me liberty – to flirt without fright. So… as a semi-single man in a loosely committed position to play quasi-stepfather, I tread on. It so happened that I got paired up with someone I found cool and cute in a peer-review. I started talking with my peer-review partner after class, escalating into studying together, and, inevitably, I became fond of their company. Andrea sighed, and said she saw this coming, and began to apologize. I didn't know what she had to apologize for, and told her it was my fault. I felt confused as to who's to blame. She said no one is to blame – this is just what happens when you have a kid in your 20s. I spoke in kind platitudes, told her I loved her still, and hoped we could reconnect someday, which she humoured, at best, but, in actuality, they were ineffective. We never spoke again. Then, I took this other person for a drink, then later dinner, then, to a party. And after that party, I saw them home and asked if I could kiss them. "Yes," she said. And then, without much thought, I was spending much of my time with this particular peer; suddenly, with full transparency regarding Andrea's proposal, I am in a new mutual-loving relationship.

Two months into our relationship, I was avidly gaming and still note-taking, but without the frenzy of Andrea's arrival. Primarily, I was playing Dragon Quest chronologically and revisiting the Sonic games. I could not for the life of me play anything past the Genesis era. I sheepishly told Chloe, my new girlfriend, that I had been hyper-obsessed with video games this past year. She winced at the thought. I told her the truth, "I'm on this obsessive deep anthropological deep dive for a project, I'm not sure where it's going anymore, but I'll get there". She told me that was a good answer, and that she just hated the headset, the endless time-sink, and the attention being diverted from the person in the room (her). Chloe is not 40. She has dated enough within our generation to have wasted her time with a contemporary gamer – the *Fortnite*, now-or-never AAA battle royale gamers like James or Lee. I told her about Sonic, coyly, leaning more on my general autobiographical interest than then the stepfather project. She told me he was my "comfort character" and told me hers were Moomin and Noo-Noo from Teletubbies, along with the San Rio[36] gang.

All was well – music and good-times took hold as real love guided me. Then, June 5th 2023 came around…

I had nothing to do besides meeting my coworkers from *IRL* at a pub to catch up over some beers. I was taking a marvelous shit before my morning shower; aimlessly browsing Instagram catching up on memes and vitriol. I see the official Sonic the

Hedgehog account has posted a video… a trailer… for a new game… *Sonic SuperStars*. I am astonished. It feels like only yesterday *Sonic Frontiers* was released. Yet, here we are. I became embarrassed. My ear was no longer to the rumor-mill ground; how did I not see speculation or leaks for this? My Otakuism had faded in the month preceding. "*SuperStars*?" I thought, disgruntled. "Must be another cash grab compilation". I was weary. I felt anxiety; what could this be? I clenched my sphincter, found the trailer on YouTube, and hit play on "Sonic Superstars - Announce Trailer".

The SEGA logo appears and fades. Classic 16-bit Sonic runs through the all-too-familiar Green Zone; in high resolution and a blazing frame rate. He races towards the Robotnik sign-post signalling the end of the act, skipping over a checkpoint lamppost in the process… but, to his surprise, the environment has been split between 16-bit retronometry and glossy computer-generated shimmer. In short order, Sonic spin dashes across the polygon Rubicon. He pauses, takes a gander at his retexturized hands like a novice psychonaut, and gazes back at the retro habitat in dismay. He hastily spin dashes to-and-fro across the dual-gonic plain. The discerning viewer will notice Fang, the antagonist of *Sonic Triple Trouble*, hiding in the shadows of the 16-bit palm tree. Sonic commits to the new landscape, and begins running. We see his red shoes comically spinning below him. He's Chibi, but not too Chibi – a portmanteau of *Sonic Prime* and *Sonic Generations* classic Sonic. An intertitle interrupts our first glimpse of in-game footage to warn us: "Sonic is back in a brand-new adventure!". We flash to an autumnal landscape; similar in color palette to the second act of Angel Island Zone in *STH3*. The upper vertical landscape pans to reveal aerial racetracks – semi-borrowed from *Frontiers* (I've yet to play *Frontiers*) – that boost his speed and keep him on route midair. I don't like it – it seems clunky and disruptive of the flow I've come to love in the original trilogy. The trailer continues on… I sense a barrage of clumsy bells and whistles. "With an all-new look". Sure… new-ish. The next shot shows Sonic grinding on a vine – ala City Escape in *SA2*. I have flashbacks to the Game Gear games, loaded with unfinished mechanics and extemporaneous item boxes. Less, in the 2D platform, I've determined, is often more. Tony Hog is interrupted once more: "Play as Your Favorite Characters' '.

"Finally we'll get a 3D render of Fang!" a Redditor wrote with saccharine ineptitude. I commented, on my burner account 'BlazeTheCat420', "You dumbass" – I wrote 'Hedgehog', originally used in the pejorative form in both *The Tempest* and *Richard III,* but choose the laymen-friendly 'dumbass' instead as this drooling kindergartener would be baffled by an antiquated insult – "Fang is a playable character in *Sonic the Fighters*. That's a 3D game. It's the image used of him on the Sonic wikia. ". I have yet to play *Sonic the Fighters* as it breaks my self-imposed fifth-generation trammel, except for an arcade cabinet on Granville Island called Adventure Zone that appears to have survived

since my last visit in 2007. As I had begun to type away in my fan-frenzy, I emailed Adventure Zone.

> Hey! Strange question. I've just recalled playing *Sonic the Fighters* on an arcade machine there. Wondering if it's still around? If not, does some know when it left and where it may have gone. Working on a book tangentially about Sonic. It's a bit of an anecdote admittedly, nonetheless trying to get my story straight. Thanks!

I had gone past reading and learning – I had reached understanding. I seethed like an Otaku. I was reading the text, news that a new 2D Sonic was imminent, and I understood. The effort had paid off. I was pissed off that SEGA had not done what I wanted.

23

Effort justification: A term I learned from the *Homestuck* Wikipedia page I've found myself thinking on as I revisit this body of work as it is now. Completionism. I have always had a need to check all the boxes; to finish the list. To do it all. Because of this, my book is filled with references to films and music from various end-of-decade lists I have completed. Yet, my primary motivator has been eclipsed by real love; age appropriate love; mutual deceive togetherness; meaningful wanton desire; the re-ascent of great youthful passion. How did I spend the first half of this year lost in a project to master the Sonicsphere? Because I wanted to – needed to? – but I didn't finish it, as I hadn't in 2021. So… Here we are: at an impasse? To stay or go; to abandon this work. Would it ensure my future prose were of a higher calibre to have done this without seeing it to publication? Yes, no doubt. That alone makes it worthwhile… Yet, I look online, and see no novel of this ilk. No metafictional new-games journalist work covering the entirety of the Sonic franchise in an attempt to continue fucking an aging alt-hottie. Never, ever, has this been done. I don't doubt it's been attempted. Sonic fans are unruly Otaku freaks in multitudes, but they, as far as I can tell, are not quite me. So, I did, for some months of the summer, put my writing away in lieu of love songs, beach days and newfound healthy transfixion.

Joseph Conrad suggested that literature, at its most divine and inspired, must be symbolic in order to reach an eminent state[37]. My novel, as it stands before you, is far from symbolic and semiotic. Our narrative has dispersed altogether. Andrea is gone! Oh no! It is but another post-modernist self-insert novel, in the contemporary canon of *Milk Fed*, meant to, perhaps, give solace to the reader who relates to my tale, or, even, give understanding to those who hold contempt for the particular generic figure I have

castigated myself as. In addition, weaving a narrative out of the Sonic the Hedgehog franchise is a Sisyphean task worthy of literary pursuit. But, at this standstill, I am urged by Conrad's proclamation to strive beyond my little loric lullaby and boldly sing:
"What does Sonic represent?"

Speed. Speed first.
Verticality movement and Horizontality exploration. Quick!
To move horizontally is to ascend, towards the heavens.
Yet, to make movement in this mortal plane, one must navigate aptly on flat ground.
Sonic does this. The platformers do this.
Ascend! towards the Sonic-blue sky.
Sonic goes to space time-and-time again.
In *CD*, *2*, *3&K*, and more!
It took Mario until *Galaxy* to reach upwards…
Not so true, for the vines reach the O-Zone early on…
Yet, I hunger for more.
Video Games.
I'm in the driver's seat.
Parameters typed up by Naka give me a semblance of control.
Controlled control.
As their Mascot.
My mascot.
Our mascot
Character: a set of traits defining oneself.
Sonic, a character; not so mutually agreed upon.
Symbols…
Ellipses…

In my introductory thesis, I offhandedly mentioned Bible Scholars in relation to headcanon. As I dive deeper into Sonic ludology, I feel it necessary to elaborate. An ellipsis is an omission of words, or narrative, that the writer, or god, wants them to fill in. A cursory survey of bible scholarship suggests that this results in theological headcanon, in similar frivolousness to the Sonic fan… We crave narrative. Entertainment. Escapism. I know we do. You wonder, where does the story go from here? He's dropped the whole conceit?! Just like that!? I don't give a fuck about *Sonic*! Where's the drunk Iranian? Where's the summer love? Where's the family drama? Where's the pining and pain and gloom and doom and crypto conspiracies and sex scenes?

I asked Chloe if I could buy a 220 dollar SEGA Saturn and a 40 dollar PS3 super slim on Facebook marketplace. She said "you don't need my permission!". I bought a computer instead, and emulated the Saturn. I never got around to playing much more than *Panzer Dragoon* and messing around in the open world of *Sonic Jam*…

> A thinly-veiled stand-in for the author works at a liquor store and develops a relationship with an older woman, a frequent customer. They have a summer fling. In the fall, he returns to school and she all-but-ghosts him. He gets a new job, at a movie theatre, as a projectionist. He screens the second live action Sonic movie. He runs into her there to discover she has a thirteen-year-old son he didn't know existed. She says that her son has been a hindrance on her dating life, that she thought he would leave if he knew - her ex-husband conveniently has the kid over the summer. Her son is mega obsessed with Sonic and is sort of a 4chan edge lord Twitch stream freak. The romance rekindles, and the author's stand-in decides he can play step-daddy. Due to a labyrinthine crypto-fraud scheme run by the ex-husband, the girlfriend has to go to Hong Kong, where her ex lives and transfers the kid to school there for the year, but promises to return the next summer, hoping that - pending the arrest of her baby daddy - the hero can step in and fill the parental gap. In the interim, he began obsessively consuming and writing about Sonic in an effort to relate to the kid, only to develop a genuine unshakeable, holistic interest in video games beyond being a would-be father-figure. As he loses himself in retro games, the thought of Andrea and Harrison drift away, and instead he spends his time writing about Sonic-for-Sonic's-sake. He meets a new girl, an age-appropriate girl named Chloe, who loves him with no hang-ups nor caveats nor mysteries. He continues to play video games, but for his own interest - largely focused on applying a contemporary lens to *Database Animals* and the *Theory of Narrative Consumption* to multi-entry franchises where narrative is secondary to characterization. That, and JRPGs.

After purchasing a green screen from Amazon and spending many weeks putting together a 'Hog 0' YouTube video, Jake decided that writing really was better; imagine being a fucking YouTuber! Inspired by DIY artist supreme Matt Farley of Motern Media, who once said "letting an idea be half-finished prevents the mind from producing new ideas" (paraphrased), he returned to his novel as it stood - leaving in dated references that don't perfectly align with the epoch of the fictional conceit - like the *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* one.

In April 2025, he was awarded an undergraduate degree in English literature; during the final semester, he considered, again, refiguring what he had learned from writing about

Sonic into a Master's degree. However, his principles defied such a pursuit: a life of responding to others' art paled in comparison to making something yourself. So, I (he) focused on other things. Though, the Hog still haunted him, and he pecked away at it in the interim, and decided to finish it as it stood; in the 2D era, with a couple games missing, notably *Sonic CD* which he scrapped after attempting to take a high-dose of edibles and write about like an EroWid trip report; it went nowhere, however important it is to the lore. He hopes the reader accepts that we may never read his thoughts on *Team Sonic Racing: CrossWorlds*.

Now, almost every night, Jake plays his Odin Pro 2 or something on Steam; he's yet to make much mileage on the *PS1* era; so far, Jake hates *Final Fantasy VII* despite the vigor of its narrative, it's just such a god-damn eyesore and its difficult to navigate the terrain compared to its predecessor *FF VI* - perhaps the greatest game ever made, with such a beautiful sense of sentimentality heralding friendship as the utmost virtue; he likes *Sin and Punishment* a lot, though, and enjoys playing high-quality arcade ports for the Saturn, *Bushido Blade*, and recent 16-bit throwback indies like *Hollow Knight*, *Undertale*, and *Void Stranger;* he was extremely moved by *Undertale*, which he chalks up to a powerful sincerity Chloe brought out in him. Perhaps, he finished writing this, too, because he imagined Andrea would've actually read it, if she was still around, and would've been constructive and apprehensive while making sure to appreciate that he actually wrote a fucking a book; hard to say if that'd be the case, really, since it's been a while. It is now December 2025, and Jake is 30, and he has still not played very many games from after 1995 - amassing a Rolodex of over two-hundred games played meaningfully over four years under the guise of research. Jake finished up all the writing preceding the exact moment you are reading right now, mostly toning down the Tim Rogers' style prose and painfully goonerish sex scenes and tread on, freely, elsewhere, onto other things.

This is a work of fiction. *it fleeted.*

> I saw the Iranian man at the pool recently. He appeared sober, helped fix the sauna, and kept to himself otherwise. His gut was huge, like it was about to explode. Like it was made of cheap elastic ready to snap. You don't see guys like that too often.

onic Adventure

S The graceful translation of Mario into 3D, compared to the emergence of *SA* post-Dark Ages reveals why, perhaps, the Otaku response to Sonic is so ripe for unrelenting headcanon, speculation, derivative work, and grand narratology: the inclusion of a full-fledged story in tandem with its multi-character selection. That, and the Chao Garden.

Sonic Adventure features a litany cut scenes and a diverse array of non-titular playable characters. That is to say, Sonic Adventure has a definitive narrative that expands upon its shaky lore and gives a literal voice to its cast of characters beyond the scope of previous entries given the technical prowess of SEGA Dreamcast at the time. Elements of pre-supposed headcanon are put into question or potentially shattered completely with the advent of these technology-enhanced narrative tools. Unlike the preceding 2D platformers, it is not a simple set of obstacles and finish lines that allows the player to defeat Robotnik, but instead a complex nonlinear narrative The plot of Sonic Adventure is told out of chronological order intentionally ala *Rashomon*. In order to find the narrative chronology, the player must reach flashback scenes that provide exposition, as well play through each character's stories wherein overlaps take place. The game does not force the player to stop playing a specific storyline, but instead gives them the option to switch by returning to the main menu. A 1999 IGN reviewer lamented that the nonlinear mechanism of storytelling would be improved upon if Sonic Adventure "[had] made you alternate between characters as the story dictated" (Justice). Upon returning to the game and selecting a character, a short text scrolls recapping the events preceding where the player has progressed to. The disjointed narrative, text scrolls, and inclusion of seven, eight counting Super Sonic, playable characters leads to speculation as to why the story is as emphasized as it is. But what really makes *Sonic Adventure* material for the great scrutiny of the Otaku community and ripe for fan debate and headcanon, is the game's unique setting and inclusion of NPC characters.

Semiotic-wise, one would recognize *Sonic Adventure* as taking place on an Earthy land similar to our own, instead of the picturesque nature world and succeeding industrialized hell-scapes of Adventure's 2D predecessors. The earth of Adventure is filled with non-player characters who appear human, a first for the series other than de facto super villain Doctor Robotnik. The series takes such a dramatic environmental shift, and allows the player to interact with these human characters at will. None of these non-player human's feature dialogue that takes heed to an anthropomorphic blue-hedgehog occupying their space. The game differentiates Sonic Adventure from Mario 64 in its attempts to be representative of a real-life space. The setting of the action-stages are closer to the fantastical-nature scapes and hyper-industrial of the 2D games, but the open world between them is decidedly Earthian. Since the game offers

exposition, backstory, and fleshes out the lore of proceeding entries, one may question why this contrasting change in setting is left to the imagination.

The addition of a foreign-to-the-franchise mechanic in Adventure is the enigmatic pet-simulator: the Chao Garden. Reviewers have compared the Chao Garden to Tamagotchis, wherein the player is tasked with performing basic tasks including breeding, feeding, and playing with their virtual pet and are rewarded with watching it grow, evolve, or perform at a higher level in mini-games. The Chao Garden is a far-cry from the fast-paced nature of Adventure's action stages as it requires patience and no reaction time. This changes the dynamic of the player's relationship to the character, or the subject. The apparent appeal of taking control of a character like Sonic and friends is in their design-ability correlation and associations: I am Sonic, Sonic goes fast, therefore I will go fast. The Chao Garden subverts the association with the subject, wherein Sonic and by virtue the player, are not rewarded for speed and accuracy, instead for patience and simulated parenthood. It reduces the visualization to a vessel for the player's desire to care for the Chao by dissociating the preconception established by the action-oriented gameplay of the primary campaign, and by preceding entries. If one were to solely play the Chao Garden element of Adventure with no preconceptions of what makes up Sonic's identity, it would be simply an anthropomorphic blue hedgehog and would leave the rest to the player's headcanon. The Chao Garden is absurd in the context of the franchise and of *Adventure* but is fleshed out enough to spark an Otaku sub subculture.

THE END

Thanks for reading *HOG*. Please, do not confuse JP for Jake; for no matter how callous, drunk, and didactic as I get too - it never fleets, and for whatever your Sonic may be, shrewd reader, I truly hope it never fleets for you too.

I don't want to write something like this again.

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[1] According to Megan Thee Stallion, the progenitor of the Hot Girl Summer, "if you're in a committed relationship, you can [still] participate."

[2] In the United States. In the surplus of public support for social causes, Canada is often confused for the United States by quick-trigger advocates on social media. Gay marriage has been legal in Canada since 2005, while in the States it was federally codified in 2015.

[3] *The Super Mario Movie (2023)*, or, *Sonic the Hedgehog 3* (2024) *A Minecraft Movie* (2025)

[4]. I read a PDF of this book on my damaged phone before switching to the work computer on a slow evening, and spoke with a wonderful middle-aged librarian about it as I closed. No IPA drinker is better read than he. It is, unfortunately, not the hops-loving bookworms but the gamers that created the way we meme, interact and cluster together online.

[5] Working Title

[6] Yuji Naka interview with the UK *Official Nintendo Magazine* Issue #61 (November 2010)

[7] Inspired by Insert Credit episode 52's "Demon Negotiation" discussion on video game books. They unanimously suggest an "Oral history of Sonic the Hedgehog's Genesis era" would be their ideal video game book – this inspiration for this chapter. I add that they criticized Boss Fight Books, who rejected this novel outright.

[8] New Games Journalism is not much of a thing anymore, but I used to justify my stylistic voice, and have since examined its detractors with an open mind. "[NGJ is] positively inviting the egos with typewriters to wank themselves silly while forgetting what the main purposes of

these articles actually are" to quote a 2005 blog post by/on RAM Raider. He is not wrong, but he is not right either.

[9] Authorial intent is a contentious debate amongst literary scholars;

[10] A dead-horse of a term, but a useful one nonetheless, referring to the acceptable behaviour within the confines of game and play as oppressed to in real life. For example, I can't tackle my professor willy-nilly, but if he and I were playing Football, it would be fair-play.

[11] In the Marxist sense. I'm not a Marxist, but this is a useful and productive way, ironically, to develop a cultural object / product.

[12] A portmanteau of 'bad guy' and 'Robotnik'.

[13] I had to visit my friend James's Reddit account to find the title of this Subreddit. I appreciate him engaging with pseudonymous forum culture, although I wish it was somewhere else. To my dismay, no comments from James's twelve-year tenure on Reddit included any mention of the Big Blue's first outing. In fact, he hadn't mentioned Sonic at all…

[14] Cakewalk is an expression that always remind me of a cake with a stripper hidden in it

[15] This is a reference to *Sonic 1 Forever*, a decompiled remake of Christian Whitehead's well-loved Android port-neigh-remake, which I played through over two Michelob Ultras, and enjoyed.

[16]

[17] SEGA purchased Rovio in 2024 in August 2023; I wonder what u/IHateAngryBirds thought of that.

[18]. I recognize the irony here.

[19] *Tenent of Wildfell Hall*

[20]

[21] Tragically, Pepsi Max was discontinued in Canada circa 2002, although a surplus lingered for many years afterwards.

[22] In *Speedrun: The Unauthorised History of Sonic the Hedgehog*

[23] 1995 is loose - it is when the 16-bit era significantly slowed down, but SNES and Genesis games continued to be released into the later part of the 90s. I played a couple 1996 and 1997 joints; I'm speaking about the fourth generation of consoles and proceeding.

[24] spoiler: it ended up closer to 200.

[25] A made-up word as opposed to an idyllic, quiet rural life or a native of central Peloponnese.

[26] See: excuse

[27] Featured in the YouTube video "Worst Levels Ever # 28" by whoisthisgit – a soulful text-only classical cynic. In this video. According to this video, this boss battle is easier in the Japanese release than American, which strikes me as done intentionally considering the Japanese version predates the North American release by a month. As I uncovered on the official SEGA of Japan website, Masato Maegawa (the auteur and president of Treasure, and the lead programmer on *Dynamite Headdy*) was explicitly asked by SEGA of America to make *Heddy* more difficult in America: "It was decided to make an overseas version, but I was told that if the game was easy, it wouldn't sell well in the United States, so I remember being happy to make adjustments when I was asked to make it difficult.". He goes on to blame the popular game rental market in America that I previously suggested influenced the style of this era of games. SEGA, in the 90s, I've surmised, was particularly contemptuous towards rentals to the point of defining what, perhaps, makes a Genesis game a *Genesis* game.

[28] Not including the schlocky *Dr. Mario* knock-off *Sonic Eraser* which was an early downloadable game promoting *STH 1*, and the *Waku Waku Sonic Patrol Car* arcade game. I have played them both, and chose to right about them because, frankly, they too, are no more "Doki Doki" facts.

[29]. A taut port of the Amiga game. *Zool* was intended as Amiga's competitor to Sonic. While it failed at doing so, I find Zool to be rather unique and pretty neat – I mean neat in a complimentary Carlton-from-The-Fresh-Prince kind of way.

[30] Technically, she was an early adopter of Fourth-wave or, a Tumblr feminist. I don't use the latter term critically, as one might in a reactionary Twitter thread circa 2014, but just to describe a real phenomenon from my late-teens.

[31] A major irony given the lyric "Unlike Sonic, I don't chuckle"; a lyric from "Unknown from M.E.", Knuckles' theme in *Sonic Adventure 2*

[32] Sourced from *Sonic Retro*

[33] In the preceding chapter, I referenced playing *Marble Madness*. I have since played quite a lot of *Marble Madness* in a kick-back and watch *Real Housewives of the OC* kind of way. I DID NOT just grab this analog as it appears on Wikipedia, but came to it on my own.

[34] Double entendre for the Adderall, an amphetamine identical to street drug Speed, and Sonic's main characteristic

[35] Vulgar Auteurism is a critical lens for viewing films seen as overtly trashy as art in their own right. It was coined by Scott Foundas in a *Cinema Scope* article defending Micheal Mann. Micheal Mann has been nominated for four Academy Awards, although has since been scorned for over-indulging in his trademark blue color palette and synthwave aesthetics in lieu of thematic substance. A better example of consistently vulgar auteurs, as I see, are the macho-pomp of Zack Snyder, the sexed-up green-screen quasi-Wuxia of Paul W.S. Adamson, the cynical libertarian scorn of Uwel Boll, and the working-class nu-metal editing of Tony Scott.

[36] *Hello Kitty* company. I footnote this because I didn't know this at the time.

[37] Sourced from Anna Khachian on the episode "Clutching Pearlythingz" of her podcast *Red Scare*